

Sacrifices

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Summary: It was six months after she was taken that she returned on the back of a dragon. Left to die on the cliffs, Astrid wouldn't go down without a fight, but they'll all have to make sacrifices to end this war. AU

1. Prologue

It was six months after she was taken that she returned on the back of a dragon.

The beast had been sighted at dawn, when it was still a mile out to sea - a proud blue creature, with sharp spikes and spines, headed for cliffs of Raven Point. Gothi had spotted it from her house perched high above the village, and within minutes the panic had started. Sighting a dragon in daylight was a bad omen - they had only attacked under the cover of darkness for the past five years, but their raids had grown bolder over time. A daylight raid was only a matter of time.

But it was a single dragon, carrying one of their own on its back.

It had landed on the barest edge of the cliff, where the rock kissed the air, and its claws had barely touched the ground before it took to the sky once again with a shrill cry. The warriors who had raced up the steep hills only to see their prey retreat had shouted curses and breathed quiet sighs of relief, until they realise what the beast had left behind.

She carried no weapons, but her eyes kept the villagers at bay long after they recognised her. She had somehow both aged and grown younger in the six months since they had left her for dead on the same cliff top - the wind had roughened her skin, and a thin scar traced her cheekbone to the edge of her chin, but her eyes were sharp and determined where before they were clouded and resigned. Her hair, once long and braided, hung loosely around her ears, short and unbound. She still wore the wedding gown she had left in, the hem torn and soaked with mud, but had added thin fur over her shoulders, secured with a silver brooch.

It had taken her own mother a moment to reconcile the proud woman with the terrified girl they had left on the cliffs to die.

"Astrid?"

It was Ruffnut who finally spoke. She had been one of the first to the cliff, racing her brother, confident in her superior speed on the slope. She'd hardly even looked at what she was chasing, too busy yelling obscenities over her shoulder, but she'd stopped dead at the sight of the woman. Her question was half hope, half fear.

The woman turned to face her, and any doubt Ruffnut had turned to smoke. It was the same face she'd played with, joked with, taunted and harboured quiet jealousy for.

She nodded slightly at Ruff, almost privately, then turned her gaze to the crowd of warriors.

"Take me to Stoick. I'm here to negotiate peace."

* * *

><p>Astrid wasn't too surprised when they took her to a prison cell instead.<p>

She didn't speak on the journey to the village, maintaining the cool, untouchable facade as she was marched through the square and made to stand in its centre, a warrior on either side and a crowd slowly gathering behind her. The villagers stared in outright shock as she passed by, and children hid as if they'd seen a ghost. She supposed, bitterly, that they had.

The village was much the same as she had left it - a new catapult here and there, a few more houses destroyed than last time, others reconstructed. Mrs Ack carried a new baby that had been a swollen belly when she'd left, and she saw with dismay that Ingrid Spakson's arms were empty where last she'd seen a sickly little girl.

She tried not to let any emotion show as she was pushed through the streets she once called home by the people she once called battle brothers. She had seen the naked shock on Ruffnut's face, the lack of recognition in her mother's. She was stranger to them now, a stranger at best. A ghost perhaps.

A traitor at worst.

Tuffnut was one of the warriors with a grip on her arm - he'd gotten another tattoo on his arm, a mace this time, crudely drawn. Ruff had been sent ahead to convey the message - Astrid couldn't know for sure, but she doubted it was her message that was being conveyed. The message would be her presence, not her purpose. Her mother had stayed at the cliffs, disbelieving. That had almost broken her resolve, seeing her own mother refuse to acknowledge her.

Almost.

A heavy heaving of wood caught her attention - even from the square she could hear the great wooden doors of the Meade Hall opening. Ruff must have made record time.

Stoick the Vast had seen far better days. Ever since his son was killed, he had retreated into himself, less the imposing leader and more the grieving and loving father he had never been when Hiccup was actually alive. At first, the village had pitied him. After a month, they doubted him. After five years, they resented him.

The only thing that kept him from losing his chieftom was the last common ground for all vikings - dragon slaying. He had redoubled efforts, increased raids, taken to abandoning his weapons and favouring his bare hands in battle with the beasts. If anyone had questioned the story that he had beheaded a dragon with his bare hand as a baby, endless and uncountable bloody nights had silenced any doubt.

The Meade Hall was always in shadow at dawn, and only crawled out of it by midday - the chief had descended all but the last few stairs before Astrid could see him clearly.

If she had still lived on Berk, she would have said he looked tired. Knowing better, she recognised defeat.

"You're alive."

It wasn't Stoick who spoke. It was Snoutlout, so hidden by the chief's enormous frame she hadn't even noticed him. Upon noticing, the only thing to strike her was how little he'd changed.

"I've been sent to negotiate a ceasefire."

Snoutlout was still staring at her in disbelief. It took a moment for her words to sink in.

"Ruffnut said you want peace."

So her message had gone through. Things must be worse than she thought.

"Peace is the ultimate goal. But he refuses to set foot on this island without a guarantee of his and the dragons' safety."

"No way." Snoutlout didn't even pause to think about it. "No. How could he even—"

"What are the terms?"

Stoick's voice was almost as powerful as she remembered. Even as a child being named, she had been in awe of his voice and now, even barely above a murmur, it silenced Snoutlout, the entire village - it felt like even the wind fell silent to listen.

"Dismantle the catapults. Disarm the traps. Release the dragons you have in captivity—"

That drew a murmur from the crowd. She let it die down before continuing.

"Release the dragons you have in captivity," she repeated, "and he will meet you on neutral island, without dragons, to negotiate."

She had to shout the last words, to be heard over the indignant, clambering din of shouting villagers. She couldn't pick individual words, although "outrageous" "unbelievable" and "no" seemed to be fairly common sentiments.

She ignored them, and locked eyes with the chief.

It wasn't defeat, she realised. It was resignation.

There was so much she could tell him. And nothing she wanted to.

"He wants Berk defenceless so he can take it in one attack! He's taken our livestock, our people - now he wants our home as well!"

Snoutlout was still yelling, throwing his entire body into his objections. Stoick ignored him almost as much as Astrid.

"What do you think?"

Once again, the crowd fell silent - not merely at the sound of Stoick's voice, but at his sentiment.

She knew what she should say. And part of her knew it was selfish, to risk this opportunity for an end to the bloodshed for spite and petty vengeance. But she hadn't had an opportunity to speak her mind in Berk for almost five years, and she wasn't wasting this one.

"You should have asked me that six months ago."

She doesn't listen when the villagers explode again, yelling obscenities and curses and dragging her away. She vaguely hears Snoutlout ordering the _demon -wife _be locked up. As she's marched away, she holds the chief's eyes, until he looks away.

The cells on Berk were ancient and rusted - there was little use for them, when the greatest enemies they faced were beasts with wings and fiery breath. She had expected them to take her there, where if needs be she could crack the brittle iron and escape, but it seemed they had other plans.

Her stomach dropped when they turned to the west, and the new sun glinted on the chains above the Kill Ring.

2. Purity

It had begun almost as a joke.

If it wasn't food, or gold, or steel that he wanted, perhaps virgin blood would finally drive the Dragon Rider from Berk.

Astrid could almost imagine herself saying it - after three too many drinks, and a few more after that, solving the world's problems with the clarity of a drunk mind. "Maybe that'll get rid of 'em!" Then railing against arranged marriages with Ruffnut and stumbling home to throw up in her own bed. She'd had enough nights like that to know exactly how foolish a drunk idea is.

This one had stuck though.

She had been freshly nineteen when the Dragon Rider first appeared. So fresh that she was still drunk from the celebrations the night before, where Snoutlout had stolen a cask of foreign wine in yet another bid to impress her. She had shared the wine and wished she could share the unwanted attention, and had spent the next day in bed cursing the sun for shining and the world for spinning so fast. She had cursed every living being on Midgard and beyond when the raid signal broke the silence of night.

She had doubted her own eyes when she first noticed patches of stars being blotted out. Still drunk, no doubt. A black shooting star, she'd thought.

Then the Jorgenson's house had exploded in a bluish-purple blast and the danger became real.

She'd assumed Night Furies were extinct, or at least so exotic they had moved on from Berk. None had attacked for more than four years, and no one had ever seen one up close and lived to tell the tale. They were an explanation for the unthinkable, not a tangible enemy.

She'd worked hard that night to take down a Nadder with Ruff, but it had chewed through its ropes and glanced her side with a spine before she was within striking distance. Her fuzzy mind had chosen to focus on the intense blue of its scales rather than a strategy of counter attack, and it had flown away before Ruff had finished swearing at her.

Disheartened, they'd headed back to the village square and taken up buckets of water. With the low population of Berk, the next generation were yet to replace them as firefighters, too busy suckling at their mothers and learning to walk, so the younger warriors had to multi-task.

She'd just stamped out a spot fire by the well when the Jorgenson's house turned to charred splinters. Her head had whipped around, only to see a black mass shoot through the air mere feet above her head and bank over the eastern side of the village.

"Night Fury!"

The cry sent her back to being fourteen and gangly and full of rage, and Hiccup insisting he'd shot one down two weeks before he'd been eaten.

Downing a Night Fury had been a big deal back when Hiccup thought he'd done it. It would make her a hero now. So she, like every able bodied warrior who had seen the beast, sprinted to the east. She was almost at the front of the pack when it stopped dead as one.

There was the Night Fury - finally in the flesh, wings unfurled but feet on the ground. And there was its rider, standing tall and proud with a flaming sword in his hand and a mask to mirror the dragon's features.

He had wordlessly watched the crowd, eyes darting beneath his mask. The dragon behind him bared its teeth, and Astrid couldn't help feeling the rider had done so too. There was something unsettling about the way the two of them moved, in synch, constantly guarding each other's blind spots. She realised that, even though he stood tall, the Rider's knees were bent, weight shifted, ready to move. It gave his steps a bob and weave that was more animal than human.

The crowd had stood, transfixed, hardly able to reconcile what they saw with the myths and legend of a life time.

Then a Nightmare had tipped the main torch in the village square and sent a thousand pounds of burning coal into the wooden ramps down to the harbour, and the illusion was broken.

The Rider swung onto the dragon's back with a fluid step and was gone in the split second it took to register that he was merely a distraction in a greater plan.

It had taken almost two months to repair the docks, and half the fleet had been damaged beyond repair. As soon as it was fixed, the Rider returned, and this time his Night Fury itself destroyed what ships remained.

From then on, the dragon raids changed - they were no longer simple animal attacks for food and livestock, but calculated attacks, taking out key Berk defences and structures. If anything, the food situation improved - while the dragons set fire to catapults and halls, crops finally had time to grow, and lambs were born for the first time in years. But the sea was gone - apart from a few shallow beaches, Berk was cut off from the ocean by steep cliffs and dragon fire.

Rumours about the Dragon Rider flew. He became the new Night Fury, more myth than man. He was always there, although not always on the Night Fury - he had been seen on a Nadder, a Gronkle and

even, Fishlegs swore blind, a fully flaming Nightmare.

Astrid herself had only seen him twice - on the first night, and once more on the Night Fury in midsummer. Both times, it had not been the Rider but the synchronicity between him and the beast which had caught her attention - the two moved as one, in all things.

She realised one night as the others swapped stories and theories that although the Rider had been seen without the Night Fury, the opposite was never true.

It had been only days after the second attack that appeasement was first offered. Gold, Spitelout had reasoned, could buy any man's loyalty. Astrid hadn't given voice to her opinion that the Rider was more beast than man, but she had been proven right when he had attacked three weeks later and left the gold they offered him to melt in a smouldering house fire. Stoick has said nothing, preferring to sharpen an axe and watch the skies.

Steel was suggested next, then barley, then wine, then sheep, then flesh.

Tuffnut had once joked that the Dragon Rider preferred his human flesh barbecued. But as the older women scrubbed her flesh with cleansing herbs and whispered prayers, Astrid had desperately hoped he didn't want this gift either.

It was meant to be Ruffnut.

When a virgin sacrifice had been settled on, after months of desperation and almost a year without a catch, Astrid had held her friend as she cried, knowing it would be her. Ruff was younger, by almost a year, with a fuller figure and a taller frame, and a brother and younger sisters to carry the family line. Astrid was a better asset to the village - default winner of Dragon Training, vicious in her kills and demeanour, only child of the Hofferson clan. She had refused every suitor on the island, but Ruff had never been asked.

She didn't break eye contact with Ruff throughout the entire bathing ritual. To her credit, Ruff stared right back, matching her fury with calm understanding.

The boat had been one of the last to visit Berk - from a tribe far to the south, who hadn't heard about their destruction and had come to trade. Smaller row boats were sent out from Thor's beach to meet it, and no one had questioned Ruff when she climbed aboard and took an oar.

No one had noticed when her oar went unmanned on the return trip.

It took almost an entire day for anyone to notice, and by then it was too late. They found her aboard the ship, calm and collected, pulling on her vest and declaring that if they wanted a virgin sacrifice, they'd have to look elsewhere now.

Astrid wanted so desperately to hate her. But she knew too well that, in the same situation, she would have done exactly the same.

She was kept under lock and key for two weeks before another dragon raid finally broke her prison walls, literally. The smouldering edges of the hole were hot to touch, but she was too overjoyed at the prospect of breathing fresh air again to care. She slipped out in her nightgown to stand in the open air. Her home was one of the few in Berk to back onto the forest, and for a moment, she considered running. She knew the woods well enough. She could probably make it a week or two before she starved. But there was something in knowing that on an island, any escape was temporary. For now, her temporary escape could just be fresh air and cool grass against her skin.

She listened to the sounds of the raid without caring, and wondered if they would end with her suffering. If she was offered and refused, she could go back to a normal existence, fighting dragons and constantly rebuilding only to watch it all destroyed again.

If she was offered and accepted, could she kill the Dragon Rider and put an end to this?

That would go quite nicely in an epic. Offered, taken, vengeful, and victorious. She could probably ask Stoick for the chieftom after that. She was so lost in thought she barely noticed the shifting wind and sharp black mass before it had landed.

The Rider hadn't noticed her either - twenty paces away, at the edge of the house while he skirted the forest.

She realised he had landed with stealth. There was no showy sword, no loud explosions - they were using the cover of the raid instead of proving it. The Rider's feet had just hit the ground when

he saw her.

All three of them froze.

The dragon was the first to move, baring his teeth with a sizzling hiss, a purplish glow building between his jaws. Astrid couldn't help feeling this wasn't such a bad way to go. She stood her ground, determined to go down defiant.

Then the Rider placed a gentle hand on the beast's neck, and its jaws snapped shut. It looked at him, questioning. Astrid watched, fascinated, at the first sign that man and dragon could disagree.

Why did he want her alive?

To avoid breaking cover, she had reasoned. Any shots the Night Fury fired would draw the entire village this way. That was the obvious answer, the logical answer, but the Rider ruined it by stepping tentatively toward her.

He walked sideways, almost crab like, sliding parallel to the ground. His whole body shifted with each step, weight through stances, more like dancing than simple movement.

The Night Fury watched, eyes slitted directly at her. She couldn't help remembering Hiccup's bold claim, all those years ago, that he'd taken one down. If only he could see her now. If only he weren't dead and the dragon killing hadn't increased and maybe this whole stupid war would have resolved itself by now and she could just go and be who she wanted to without the constant threat of sudden death.

Like the sudden death facing her right now, sharp teeth bared.

It was odd that her last thoughts would be of Hiccup, but that, she supposed, was how life went. Maybe every life ended with recollections of the first death you saw. She should have thought of her Uncle Finn. His memories were marginally less shameful.

But instead, she shook her head and breathed _Hiccup_ to the wind, cursing him that she had to die too.

The Rider froze. Then he rushed forward, grabbing at her shoulder with gloved hands and holding her steady to stare at through the thin eye slits of his mask. She caught a half glimpse of his actual face at this distance - a sharp jaw dusted with stubble, dark brown hair and green eyes. Green. For some reason, she'd assumed they were a fiery orange.

All the while, he stared at her with something between disbelief and hunger.

Maybe this really was what he had been after all along

It had been Spitelout Jorgenson who both saved and condemned her. He had remembered her imprisonment when he first saw her house destroyed, and had sprinted to make sure they didn't lose another virgin to a loophole. He had rounded the corner with unusual stealth, hoping to catch her before she could run off, and instead caught the moment Astrid became convinced the Rider was going to carry her off.

It took a second for Spitelout to register what he was seeing, but when he did, he let out something between a battle cry and a victory whoop, running at them sword first. The dragon literally leapt back into the action, knocking Astrid to the ground and shielding the Rider with its body. Spitelout took a swing at it, but the beast was faster than anything he could throw - they were airborne before Astrid had righted herself.

Spitelout was beside himself. He pronounced the village saved. Their sacrifice was favoured. The Rider himself had dismounted, left his dragon for the first time in known memory, to appraise her.

No one asked what she thought. They hadn't before, and they didn't now.

Stoick sat silently through Spitelout's grandiose announcements of victory, and Astrid was left wondering if there would ever be victory for Stoick while dragons still roamed the skies.

She was scrubbed, plucked, braided, dressed, prayed over. The older women of the village gave her _advice_, while the younger women gave her sympathetic glances.

She was given an hour alone to farewell her family. But they had raised no objections to her

sacrifice, so she had locked the doors and told them to fuck off, spending her final hour wondering why she didn't run into the forest on the night of that raid.

She was down to her last ten minutes when a blade slipped between the door and its jamb, lifting the catch and leaving the door to swing freely.

Astrid didn't even hear it open. Ruff had to clear her throat to be noticed.

She took one sharp look at her friend, clean and pink and wrapped in flowing white, and snorted.

"Tiny tits. He's gonna leave you behind with tits that pathetic."

Astrid wanted to throttle her and hug her at the same time.

"Well you're always welcome to try your luck with those," she said, pointing at Ruff's chest. Ruff gestured grandly at her own breasts in return, snorting again.

"These already worked. That's why you're stuck in the dress."

Astrid stiffened. Joking about her frame had been the first genuine feeling she'd had in weeks, but with one comment, she had a sharp reminder of who's fault this really was.

Ruff seemed to read her mind. "It's no one's fault. It's the dragons' fault. It's the idiot who came up with this whole thing's fault. It's the village's fault. But don't pretend for a second you wouldn't have done the same if you could. And don't spoil me being the best friend you ever had by being a sour bitch saying goodbye."

Astrid raised an eyebrow. "Best friend I ever had?"

Ruff nodded. "Of course. I got you a present and everything."

It was only then that Astrid noticed the cloth bag in the younger girl's hand. Suddenly conscious of it, Ruff held it out.

"I know what you're planning, since I planned it too. This might be your only chance."

Astrid opened the bag, Ruff's words filling her with unexpected hope. The hope promptly faded upon seeing a small, ornate white hair pin. Dragon bone most likely, with a knotted circle at the blunt end. Ruff could occasionally be coerced into carving such trinkets for weddings and name days, but had always refused any requests by Astrid (or for her). It seemed almost cruel to give her one now.

"Um... thanks? Is it dragon bone?"

Ruff groaned. "No, you idiot. It's a Zippleback tooth. From the one Tuff and I took down while you were being 'divinely chosen'. They won't let you take a real weapon."

Astrid turned the pin to examine the sharp end. "So why -" The answer hit her like a ton of bricks. Zippleback teeth retained their venom after death and extraction. They traded at an exorbitant price due to their deadly potential as arrow heads or ballistics.

"Here, let me." Ruff took the pin and stepped behind her, slipping it into the already complicated braids. It sat just behind her ear, a slight weight on roots far above the pin itself. "Can you reach it there?"

Astrid brushed a hand up and felt the knotted end of the pin - she nodded.

"Good. Go for the eye is my advice - you might cut through without even needing the poison to finish the job. Don't waste it in his mouth though - it needs to get into the blood."

Astrid nodded again, not trusting her voice. Ruff seemed to understand.

"Of course, with those tits he probably won't let you close enough to use it, but it's worth a shot."

Astrid let out half a laugh before grabbing Ruff in a tight bear hug. She could feel the carved knots of the pinhead, comforting against her skin. Ruff hugged her back, silent in solidarity.

Offered. Taken. Vengeful. Victorious.

She repeated the steps to herself as she was lead to the top of Raven's Point, the wind whipping her dress. They ran through her mind as Gothi spoke the last holy words and smoothed runes and swirls onto her skin with the ash of her old home. She whispered them into the wind as the sun dipped below the horizon and she was bound to two posts, arms spread and open.

The villagers had gathered behind her, leaving a safe distance between themselves and their offering. Stoick, as always, was absent.

It was almost midnight before he appeared. By then, she'd had plenty of hours to imagine what would happen if he didn't show. Would they give up after one night? Or would she repeat this process every day, being scrubbed down and anointed and trussed up like a chicken until there was a raid for him to accept or reject her.

She needn't have worried.

They had lit bonfires, one of either side of her, and Astrid's mind was wandering to more chicken comparisons when she noticed the Evening Star begin to waver. The blackened patch of sky only grew the longer she watched it, and it was less than a minute before Fishlegs noticed too and yelled to the rest of the gathered villagers.

"He's coming!"

A hundred hands reached to their hips and found air - weapons had been forbidden in a show of good faith.

The black patch of sky grew larger, then suddenly stopped, shifting in space but not size. Hovering, she realised. Appraising. Deciding.

Then with a sharp whistle, the beast surged forward, swooping over the crowds with barely two feet of clearance. It wheeled once it reached the tree line, coming back around, and Astrid was so fixed on it she barely noticed that the rope securing her right arm to the post had been severed.

The Rider leaned down over the saddle of the dragon, knife in hand. In one motion, he severed the ropes of her left arm and closed a tight grip around her wrist. Before she could even register what had occurred, he was wrenching her up and over, onto the back of the dragon.

She didn't have time to scream before she was gone.

3. Wasted Words

The Kill Ring had fallen into disrepair before the Dragon Rider had appeared. With no new recruits to train, and empty of dragons since the accident that caused Hiccup's death, its chains had rusted and stones turned mossy.

On his second attack, the Dragon Rider had targeted it, destroying the chains and steel bars in three precise shots.

Stoick had insisted on rebuilding. The Rider had destroyed it again. It became yet another item on the list of constant reconstruction.

That had been 18 months ago. Now, the ring smelled metallic and dusty, and almost comforting to Astrid, until she realised why.

Captured dragons.

She should have guessed this was where they were keeping them - it was where they chose to keep her. She could only see Gronkles and Nightmares, but knew that behind a heavy wooden door there would be Nadders as well. She had recommended the wood herself to protect from errant spines when they were first reconstructing.

There was a smaller cage, set into the stone and off to the side, that she realised had once been a storage unit - a metal mesh door with a small Terror hatch had been added to increase dragon storage capacity, but there was still a bucket and mop inside.

She was shoved in and the door summarily shut.

There were five warriors who'd escorted her - Tuff, two slightly older, and two who's been old

when she'd started training and were too old now. She could see children peeking over the edge of the ring, hoping to catch a glimpse of the demon wife and being disappointed at the sight of a regular woman. At least she had short hair - that was enough of an oddity to keep them whispering for days.

"How will we divide up the watch?"

"Twelve hour shifts. In order of age. Going downwards."

It was odd to hear Tuff speaking in military terms. Still trying to skive off any responsibility, but in military terms none the less.

"Don't bother with long shifts," she called from the cell. The men turned, unsure if they should ignore her. "The Nadder has orders to return at sundown."

"He can do that?" Tuff, despite everything, sounded awed.

"What'll that matter if you're in your cage and we're on watch?" One of the older men asked.

"When was the last time you saw what wild Nadder fire can do to steel and bone?"

The warriors hesitated - Astrid knew they were seeing melted flesh and wasted metal.

"Have you ever seen the two fused together?"

They had. Astrid had been there when Sven Larson's prosthetic became permanent.

"That Nadder will be here by sundown. And it will take me, no matter what guards you assign."

"Yack yack yack - married life sure hasn't shut you up."

Astrid almost broke the cage door clean off when she heard Ruff's voice. She craned her neck to see further, and sure enough, there she was by the entry, balancing a shield covered in tankards, spear tucked under her arm.

"You'd think the great Dragon Master would have a better leash on his pets," she said, setting down the shield.

"What's with the table service?" Tuff was slowly learning to be suspicious of signs of goodwill from his sister, only fifteen years too late.

"Spitelout's throwing a party in the square - didn't want my own missing out."

"Spitelout? What's he got to celebrate?"

"Don't know yet - he'll probably suggest something when we're all too drunk to disagree." Ruff finished passing out the tankards and took one for herself. "How are we dividing the watch?"

"We?"

"Yeah - I'm not the sort for parties where all I get are glares from little boys and girls. You'd like it - they're about as smart as you."

Her brother, somehow, took that as a compliment.

"She keeps saying the beast will be back for her by sundown," one of the younger men said, a touch of fear in his voice.

"Is that the dragon or her husband?" Ruff said with a guffaw, slapping her thigh until the others joined her laughter. "Tell you what, if we're waiting til sundown, I'll take first and you go get some of the good stuff before Snoutlout and his cronies drink it all."

"Those aren't our orders- we should be guarding-"

"Guarding? This is babysitting boys, and I've got more experience with that than the lot of you together. That said, the lot of you together probably had a lot more drinking experience, so you might want to apply that." Ruff took a heavy draught before delivering the killing blow. "Maybe Spitelout is gonna suggest that wife swapping thing again."

They were gone before Astrid could count to ten. Ruff shook her head.

"Saddest thing is, wife-swap never happened. I made it up three months ago and now every girl in the village is using it when she wants to be alone."

Through the mesh of the door, Astrid got her first good look at Ruff, and vice versa. Where one was so different, the other had barely changed.

"Can you talk, or did he take that from you as well?"

Astrid scowled. "I don't waste words like you Ruff."

Ruff took another drink. "Shame - words are about the only thing we have enough of to waste."

Astrid eyed the half empty tankards left by the guards. Seven, she counted. Ruff had brought seven.

"Is one of those for me?"

Ruff looked down and remembered suddenly. "Oh yeah, nearly forgot." She picked up the spare, then paused, considering. "You're not expecting are you?"

Astrid shook her head.

"Good. For many reasons." Ruff knelt down and slid the latch on the Terror door open. She pushed the tankard through to Astrid's waiting hand, and for a split second, their fingers touched.

"So what's he like then?"

"Who?"

"Loki's horse - who the fuck do you think I mean?"

Astrid took a sniff at the ale - Ruff was right, it was the good stuff. She dipped a finger in, tasted it - no hint of poison. Satisfied, she took a deep draught.

"He wouldn't want me telling you anything."

"And what would you want?"

"Someone should have asked me that a long time ago." She took another drink, and noticed a touch of hurt in Ruff's expression. She hadn't expected to get the same cold shoulder as every other villager who had tied Astrid to those posts.

"He's... It's not because he doesn't want you knowing that I'm not telling. I make my own choices, and I chose to respect him on this."

"So is it true he's got a dragon's cock?"

Astrid choked on her ale.

"Odin's balls Ruff, really?"

Ruff shrugged. "So just the same size then?"

Unable to punch her, Astrid smacked at the mesh instead. It made a reassuring rattle.

"Strange - I thought for sure he's get one look at you naked and put you on the first boat back."

"If it'd been you Ruff, he would have."

Both girls snorted and took another drink.

"You've stolen my old hairstyle."

Astrid put a hand to her short locks. "Yeah, I guess I have."

"Did he do that?"

"Not exactly."

"You keep answering in riddles," Ruff complained, taking another drink. "How much booze am I gonna have to put in you to get the truth?"

"More than this yack's piss, that's for sure."

"Hey, this is high qualit-hic!"

Ruff was so surprised by her own hiccups that she stumble and fell ass first. Once on the floor, she decided she liked it there. Astrid turned over her cell's bucket and joined her.

"I haven't had a drink like this for a while," she admitted. "Reminds me of home."

"You are home."

"Then it's nice to have a reminder. A lot of people have been pointing swords at me."

"Including your husband's monster sword I suppose?"

Astrid tried to shove her through the mesh - it didn't work, but Ruff feigned to the side anyway. Her smile was tinted with sadness, and for a moment Astrid had to wonder how the last six months had treated her.

"We thought you were dead for sure."

Astrid sighed. "That little faith in me?"

"Oh I had plenty of faith. But I figured after two months when you didn't come back wearing his balls around your neck like a trophy and the raids kept happening that you weren't coming back at all." She took a sip but her heart wasn't in it - she was just stalling for time. "Didn't expect you to come back on his side."

Astrid bristled. "I'm not his pet Ruff. I'm not some trained little whore and I'm not on anyone's side. I'm here because I need to be."

Ruff accepted the answer with a swig and a sigh.

"Is he serious?"

"Sometimes. He can get so serious he hardly talks for days, but after that--"

"No, about peace. Is he?"

Astrid sighed and put down her tankard, then turned to face Ruff properly. She pulled at a cord around her neck, yanking it up and revealing a pendant - a thin spear of dragon tooth with a carved head.

Ruff raised an eyebrow. "Well I guess it doesn't hold your hair up anymore."

Astrid grabbed the pendant and held it out like a relic. "I could have used this. Gods know I nearly have. I've had more than enough chances." She paused, making sure she had Ruff's full attention.

"If I thought killing him would end this, he'd be dead. But I'm here, now, and he's alive. Don't be a fool Ruff. This might be the only chance you get."

* * *

><p>They had flown for almost an hour before the Night Fury had slowed and landed with a thump on a in a cove on a far distant island. She had been lying flat across its back like a sack of potatoes, the only position the Rider had been able to pull her into before they were speeding through the air and she was unable to breathe, let alone move.<p>

She had watched the sea rushing by beneath her, and known they were travelling further in seconds than she could sail in a month. She could feel the Rider's elbows digging into the small of her back, one hand curled around her ribs, the other rested on the saddle. After a while, she became aware of the Rider's left foot constantly shifting and adjusting, while the right leg by her face stayed still and secure.

She wasn't proud when she slithered backward off the dragon's back and landed in a boneless heap once she was certain she would meet the firm ground. The Rider followed, slipping neatly off the dragon's back to crouch beside her, waiting.

The dragon slunk to one side, watching for any sign of trouble.

They stayed there, collapsed and crouching, for almost as long as they had flown. Astrid felt seasick, as her entire world shifted and settled again and again and she desperately tried to match its rhythm.

She was his prisoner now. No, worse - she was his wife.

Her mind recalled all the terrible things the older women had said at her ritual bath under the guise of friendly advice. Stay still, try not to cry, bear it and he'll be asleep as soon as he's spilled. It's easier to lie quiet than deal with bruises in the morning. Then they had wondered aloud if the Rider would prefer a girl who fights back, one he can feel he has conquered night after night, and if that was why he had chosen her.

She raised a hand to her head and checked behind her ear. Her braids had somehow survived the flight, and the pin still rested in them. Good.

To her right, the Rider shifted for the first time in minutes. She looked over - he was edging towards her, arm first, palm open. He still wore his mask, but up close she could see the stitches and seams, and it became far less terrifying.

She watched to see what he would do. Judging by his calm and slow manner, it wasn't a fighter he wanted. Good thing too - she wasn't sure her legs could carry her.

He took a quicker step, coming beside her, and lifted her own arm by the bicep before sliding under it. His hand came under her far arm and just when she was about to push him away for making a grab at her breasts, he straightened, taking her weight with him, carrying her with his shoulder. Her feet folded her, readjusting to solid ground.

He carried her towards an indent in the cliff-like walls that formed the cove - an almost cave, open like a toothless mouth. Maybe he was going to kill her in there. His light grip on her made it unlikely, but perhaps he preferred his meat unmarked.

The dragon followed, sliding silently through the night.

At the edge of the cave, she considered running - making for the forest, finding a way out of the cove, at least getting away from him. But her legs were still uncertain and she'd seen how fast he could move.

Stay still, try not to cry, bear it and he'll be asleep as soon as he's spilled.

Then bury Ruff's pin in his neck and get out of here.

He dropped her at the edge of the cave, disappearing into the blackness. A sharp spark broke the darkness, then a wavering light, then quickly the entire cave came into view as the Rider circled it, lighting candle after candle.

The cave was revealed as shallow, barely ten feet deep, but dry and dusty. Books were piled on rough hewn rock shelves, and a pallet covered in furs took pride of place against the unfinished walls. The edges of the rock were stained black, and she realised that the shelter had been created, not found. One blast from the Night Fury could destroy wooden houses, but only ten feet of solid rock it seemed.

She tried not to look at the bed, not to think what it meant.

The Rider lit the last of the candles, then turned to her. Finally, she had his full attention. She could feel the wind through her dress and was left to think how thin it must look. How thin it was.

Then in three quick steps, he had closed the distance between them, thrown aside his mask and pressed his lips roughly against hers. Her mouth dropped open, not in response but in shock at the Rider's face.

He pulled away and buried his face in her neck, braids tickling his face.

"Astrid."

He breathed it against her flesh, the first word she'd heard him say. Or at least, the first she'd heard in nearly five years.

Her wits finally gathered and she shoved him away by the shoulder, sending him sprawling in the grass. Even caught unaware, he was stronger and heavier than she remembered, harder to push around.

She checked his face again to make sure she wasn't mad.

She wasn't.

"Hiccup?"

4. Ghosts

"You're dead."

She said the words with venom, as if furious that he wasn't.

"Sorry to disappoint."

He righted himself, rolling to his feet and offering her a hand. She stared at it, then looked back up at him. He had to fight the urge to fall to his knees and kiss her again.

Odin's ghost, he wanted to do that again. And again. He probably shouldn't have, but there was no taking it back now - but she was there, and she knew, and he'd finally found her and... he definitely wanted to do that again. Once was almost worth the twenty years of waiting. Twice would be worth the five years of longing and confliction. He couldn't imagine what could happen now that she was actually here, in the flesh, in wedding garb of all things.

"But you're dead."

He rolled his eyes and waved the hand, still hanging in front of her.

"Very funny. Come on, it's warmer inside."

She snorted and looked pointedly at the cave. He grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet before she could object, dragging her towards the cave.

"Okay, we might have slightly different definitions of inside. But that doesn't matter, because you're here, and -"

She punched him, square in the jaw.

There was the Astrid Hofferson he remembered.

She stood at her full height, still shorter than him, and ranted while she looked around for a weapon.

"Why did you kiss me? And how are you still alive? And - what have you done?!"

He stopped short, rubbing his jaw. "Why is it always violence with you?"

"With me?" She had found a metal rod on the floor and snatched it up, holding menacingly and using it to emphasise each accusation. He didn't have the heart to tell her it was one of Toothless' connecting rods.

Speaking of Toothless, he really should have been more of a help by now...

Hiccup glanced over his shoulder, only to see the jet black dragon staring back at him, watching without engaging. He'd obviously decided this wasn't his fight.

Useless reptile.

"You... you burnt your own village! You died, and everything went to Hel, and then you show up in

charge of them!"

"Okay, Astrid, let me explain—"

"And you took me like some common kitchen whore!"

She swung the connecting rod at him - he ducked and grabbed the end, more to protect the metal than himself, and found himself face to face with her, on either end of the rod.

"Took you?"

She snarled, baring her teeth. "Don't pretend for a second you didn't know it was me!"

"Of course I knew it was—"

It hit him. She hadn't known.

"Did you not know it was me?" His voice was calm and even.

She wrenched the connecting rod out of his grip and made another swipe at him - he wove around it and batted it out of her grasp. The metal clashed against rock, echoing in the enclosed space. She moved to punch him again, but he grabbed the fist in mid air and held it there.

"Did you not realise?"

She smacked at his wrist with the edge of her hand, making him drop her hand. Yep, definitely still the violence. She held her own damaged fist close to her chest and glowered at him.

"Of course not! How was I supposed to?"

No. Oh no.

"But... in your yard, you..."

He looked back to Toothless, desperate for support. The dragon looked on, unhelpful. He turned back to Astrid.

Her eyes narrowed, then widened, realising what she'd done. What he thought he'd seen.

"You... I saw** that,**" she said, gesturing at Toothless, "and I remembered you going on about taking one down when we were 15. I thought, if you - dead you - could see me now..."

She trailed off, and crossed her arms over her chest, suddenly self conscious.

He could see her. For everything holy, he definitely could. What was that dress made of, paper?

She had grown taller, but only just. Her hair was the same as ever, but now he'd had it against his face it almost seemed to glow. Her lips seemed rounder, softer, although that could just be the fact that he'd finally done what ten years of daydreaming hadn't. And her body - Thor's hammer, he'd thought she was perfect when she was fifteen. Apparently, perfection could be improved on.

It was lucky she was so fixated on him being dead. It hadn't given her time to behead him for kissing her. Speaking of...

"Why did you think I was dead?"

She shrugged - the fabric of her dress shifted over her skin and... nope, he was not letting his mind wander in that direction.

"You went missing the day all the dragons escaped from their cages. It didn't take much to put two and two together. Plus there was the blood all over the Kill Ring floor."

Ah. He probably should have guessed that would come back to bite him.

"Sheep's blood."

"What?"

He shrugged. "Sheep's blood. I figured they'd need to eat if they wanted to actually get anywhere once I set them free."

"_What?!" _

His heart dropped when he realised she really didn't know anything. Looked like he'd be starting at the very beginning.

"I guess we should start with introductions then." He took a step back and gestured at the Night Fury. "Astrid, Toothless. Toothless, Astrid."

There was an eerie similarity in the way dragon and woman bared their teeth and snarled at each other.

"And how long has _Toothless _been a friend of yours?"

Uh oh. She wasn't going to like this. "Um, since the start of Dragon Training?"

It took three seconds for his words to sink in. Then she launched herself at him, fists first.

Her momentum was enough to send them both sprawling into the cove and onto softer grass - which was probably good, since she seemed determined to pummel him into powder.

Well, she was about to learn what she had missed in the past five years.

She stumbled to her feet and threw a fist at his jaw - he dodged, easily, before grabbing her other hand to keep it out of play. She snarled, twisting her arm around and free, and aimed a kick at his kneecap. He swivelled out of the way and grabbed the flying foot, pulling at it, throwing her off balance and shoving her to the ground.

She grabbed his tunic and she fell, determined to take him down with her.

They fought in the dirt, kicking and biting and clawing like wild animals. He had the advantage in the fight - he was taller, stronger, perhaps even better trained. But he was holding back where she wasn't. He hadn't had a good fight in months, and it felt like she hadn't either. The tangle of limbs and clawing hands were as good human contact as any, and a quiet sense of superiority flooded through his veins at her perplexed face each time he dodged an attack or launched one of his own. The element of surprise wore off quickly, but it wasn't until she buried her teeth in his shoulder that he'd had enough.

Using the strength he'd been masking, he threw her to one side, rolling on top of her before she could crawl away, pinning her arms above her head where it was safe to hold but would hurt to struggle. She tried to buck him off with her legs and hips, but he sat firm, weighing her down to the ground.

Somewhere inside him, his fifteen year old self cheered. He'd just beaten Astrid Hofferson in a fight. Finally.

She looked up at him, defiant. Her face was streaked with mud and her braids were falling loose, but even with her face screwed up in fury she was still heart-stoppingly beautiful. Gods, could she ever look bad?

She tilted her head up and spat at him, proving decisively that she could.

"Fuck you."

He tried to focus on her eyes, and speak calmly now that he finally had her full attention.

"I thought you knew. I thought you knew it was me and you had a plan and that's why you were on that cliff. That's why I took you. Because the only reason you would be there was if you wanted to be."

Her eyes narrowed. "Then you're a fool. They're terrified of you and they'll try anything to get rid of you and some idiot suggested a blood sacrifice and I drew the short straw. There's no plan, Hiccup, there's nothing but dumb luck. How could I have known?"

Five years of adulation were falling apart in front of his eyes. What had happened to the sharp and intelligent girl he remembered?

"Because you're Astrid. You always know."

She scowled and tore her hands from his grip. Realising he still had her pinned to ground, he scuttled to his feet, offering a hand up. She refused, uselessly dusting down her dress.

"I didn't know about your precious dragon," she said, gesturing at the still interested but apathetic Toothless, "and I sure as Hel don't have some grand plan." She tried to throw another punch at him, but he blocked it without blinking, holding her closed fist in his larger hand.

"What was that for?"

She pulled her fist back, holding it against her chest. She must do that whenever her pride was hurt, he realised.

"Try to touch me again, and I'll make sure you're dead this time."

She stalked to the other side of the cove, climbing a small stack of rocks and settling atop the tallest, where she could hear him coming. She lay down on her stomach, watching him like a hawk. He held her gaze.

Toothless finally sidled up to him, warbling lightly.

"I don't know bud. Guess I just don't understand women."

Toothless rolled his eyes. Strange as humans were, he knew a mating display when he saw one.

* * *

><p>"Take me back."<p>

He'd been woken with a sharp shove in the side and a harsh demand. His eyes were still opening when she shoved him again.

"Take me home."

He rolled over to look at her, still in the now filthy white dress. He suddenly wondered why they'd dressed her like that.

"Why did they dress you like that?"

She paused, hands outstretched, about to shove him again. "What?"

"For a blood sacrifice - isn't it usually furs, or oil or something... edible?"

She frowned, confused. He took it as a cue to continue.

"If they think you're being fed to a demon, why bother with all the braids and symbols and nice dress? Why not naked and covered in butter?"

Oh sweet baby Thor, that was not a mental image he needed. He was suddenly glad he slept on his stomach.

Her frown turned into a scowl, and she grabbed a fur to sock him over the head with. He brought his hands around his head, too tired to defend himself properly. His shoulder still stung where she'd sunk her teeth in it the night before.

"Are you really that stupid?"

He soured - he was sick of playing her games. He half sat up, the fur around his shoulder slipping and subjecting his skin to the chill morning air. "Apparently I am - why?"

Astrid looked like she could hardly believe it. She took a fistful of dirty white fabric to wave in his face.

"Virgin sacrifice, you idiot."

Oh. OH.

That... actually made a lot more sense. How bitter she'd seemed about him even existing, how she'd

said in no uncertain terms what she'd do if he tried to touch her, how quickly she'd shoved him aside when he kissed her... actually, that one could be generalised to anyone who tried to kiss Astrid Hofferson. He could well be the first one to try and actually succeed.

A small part of him couldn't help but gloat. He couldn't get a second look from her on Berk, and now here she was, handed to him as a wife.

No wonder she looked so furious.

Oddly satisfied, he sunk back into the furs. She hit him again.

"You're going to take me home."

He buried himself in the remaining blankets. The mornings after night raids were the only times Toothless ever let him sleep past dawn, and he'd be damned if he wasted an opportunity to sleep in.

She'd have to do far better than hitting him to convince him of that.

"No."

She moved to smack him again, but he grabbed her elbow and pulled her off balance, forcing her into an awkward crouch half on and half off the bed. He kept a hand on her elbow, in case she tried to wake him again.

He felt her stiffen, then rotate her arm. From his grip on her elbow, it felt like she was putting a hand to her hair.

He ignored it.

"What would I have to do to make you take me back?"

He half rolled up again and winced as the chill hit. He didn't want to think too hard about that question.

"Honestly? Give me another hour to sleep and I'll consider it." He settled down again, still holding her arm. "You're welcome to join me if you like, m'lady."

He could practically hear her scowl, then her fingers were prying his from her elbow and she had stalked off.

Astrid Hofferson. The real Astrid Hofferson. After five years, it seemed she was more like he remembered than he'd care to admit. He'd always thought of her as different - in a different way to him, sure, but different none the less. He'd imagined her over the past five years, growing older, still strong but more and more curious, slowly questioning the Berk status quo. He'd seen her leaving, seeking new adventures, eventually finding herself in a dragon friendly city, perhaps with her own dragon by her side. He'd always keep an eye out in the markets for flaxen hair, just in case he was right.

But he'd never seen her. She had stayed on Berk, grown older but not wiser, and eventually been fed to the dragons.

At least she wasn't married.

Or if she was, it was to him.

He wasn't entirely sure how this was meant to work. He'd fully intended on spending the rest of his life alone, or at least as alone as Toothless' constant companionship was. Maybe one day, when all the fighting stopped, he could see himself travelling back to Berk, or spying her in a distant market place, and settling down. But that was the distant future, and she was here now.

And was it even an official marriage if she'd been left as a virgin sacrifice, or did he have to seek out a proper ceremony at some point? Not that Astrid would ever agree - although he supposed the sort of men who usually received virgin sacrifices would have already made more than liberal use of her body without worrying about the technicalities of a blood wedding. It still made his blood surge, after all these years, to think of anyone hurting her - raping her and leaving her to die was enough to make him check nearby for weapons.

No need, he realised. He could now just check for her.

Judging by the scraping sounds of rock and steel, she was trying to climb the sheer walls of the cove. She wouldn't have any luck - the only way in or out was on a dragon's back, but-

A wet black nose settled over his back, and exhaled sharply.

Great. She'd woken Toothless.

He rolled over to greet the dragon, but as soon as he saw his rider was awake, he bounded off to the mouth of the cave, flicking his head at Hiccup. Frustrated, Hiccup dragged himself out of bed, pulling a shirt over his head and wincing at the pain in his shoulder. She sure had a hell of a bite.

"I know bud, she's noisy, but I'll talk to her and try and sort it out and hopefully--"

He stopped when he saw what Toothless wanted him too.

She was halfway up the wall, using steel rods to create hand holds in the steep face. As he watched, she pulled one out from beneath her and drove it into a crack in the rock.

Toothless warbled and flicked his head at the offending female.

"Hey, not all of us can fly."

He did it again, warbling louder and bumping Hiccup with his head.

"Alright, alright, what--"

It finally hit him. Where had she gotten those metal spikes?

Toothless rolled his eyes and gestured to his saddle. The connecting rod there was still secure, but...

"Astrid! Astrid, get down from there!"

She ignored him, driving another connecting rod into the wall. Now that he knew what they were, the sharp shriek of metal made him wince.

"I am not listening to anything you have to say. Go enjoy your sleep in. See if the dragon will join you in bed - you two seem close enough."

She tested her weight on the new hand hold and, finding it satisfactory, let go of the last one. She kept yelling down at him, enjoying the insults.

"Looks like you didn't even need a bride - I'd just be a third wheel between you two."

"Astrid we need those to fly!"

She looked down - the dragon and boy stood side by side, staring almost pleadingly up at her.

"Wings, Hiccup. You need wings to fly. And he has them."

She started to pull the next lowest spike out.

"Astrid, he's not - Toothless can't fly without me, and I can't fly him without the connecting rod!"

"Well congratulations - looks like you're even more stuck here than me."

She was three quarters of the way up the wall now - if she fell, she would not get back up.

Hiccup decided to change tacts. "If you get out, where will you go?"

"Back to Berk."

"How? This is an island Astrid, it's not like you can swim there!"

She paused. Her voice, when it came, was full of false bravado. "I can try!"

Shit. He'd have to lie.

"I'll take you back."

She finally stopped. "What?"

"I'll take you back to Berk. Just get down from there!"

Of course, it was only then that either of them realised she had no way down.

"Get the dragon to get me down!" she insisted, after ten minutes of yelling suggestions at one another before they were quickly shot down.

"I told you, his wings are too wide - he can't hover like a Gronkle!"

"Well then get a Gronkle?"

"What?"

"You're the Dragon Rider, master of man and beast - get a dragon that can get me down."

He paused. "Do they seriously call me that?"

"Hiccup!"

"Okay, okay, it's just - wow, really? Was that the best they could come up with?"

"Well they were pretty busy rebuilding all the forts and bridges you'd destroyed, so they didn't have much time on their hands!"

They bickered the entire morning before Hiccup finally hit on the idea of picking her up from above rather than below. Toothless' tail was only just long enough to reach down from the lip of the cove to where Astrid hung, but she grabbed onto it none the less and experienced a few seconds of the most terrifying flight than she could ever imagine before landing in a heap back on the grass of the cove.

"Okay, not the greatest landing, but—"

Hiccup had swung around in the saddle to face her, and was surprised to see her kneeling by Toothless' tail, prosthetic in hand. She was testing its weight, fanning it in and out with an intense curiosity. Eventually, she followed the lines of the controlling wires up to the saddle, before settling on his face.

"Did you build this?"

He nodded. There was a reverence in her tone that he didn't want to ruin by speaking.

"And... and he taught you everything you knew in dragon training?"

He shrugged. In a way.

"So... you really shot down a Night Fury?"

He nodded. Toothless, sensing his discomfort, nodded too. Once he had finished bouncing on the dragon's back, Hiccup thought he caught the hint of a smile on her face.

"And you'll take me back to Berk?"

Ah. This wasn't going to go down well.

"I never said when."

Astrid's expression, which he had barely had time to register as one of warmth, cracked in to fury.

"You bastard!"

"I'm thinking six months?"

"I'll kill you!" She made to storm forward, then stopped suddenly. She must have had reminders of the fight the night before, just like the teeth marks in his shoulder.

"You might," he conceded, then realised he was still on Toothless' back. He could, conceivably...

Astrid saw what he was thinking. She shook her head, slowly, with murder behind her eyes.

"Don't you dare."

He smiled sheepishly, before Toothless threw his wings down and they shot into the air, leaving Astrid and her screamed swearing behind.

5. Best Laid Plans

She was going to have to change her plans.

Killing the Dragon Rider had been a simple enough plan. Wait til he was asleep, then slit his throat and find a way back to Berk as a hero. She had even been willing to lie down and let herself be taken like a whore if it gave her the opportunity to strike. Perhaps willing wasn't the best word, but this was greater than just her - the fate of Berk rested in her hands.

And it just had to be Hiccup.

She hurled another connecting rod at the stone cliff face, and smiled thinly as it bent.

She'd waited until she was certain he wouldn't be coming back, at least not for a while, before stepping into the cave and finding something to break. She's considered slashing all his clothes to bits before realising that would just mean he'd have to walk around naked. He'd left the tangle of dark leather that made up his flight suit behind, and the helmet - he'd barely had time to put on a shirt. She'd put a knife to the flight suit but something in the leather made her stop - residual fear of an unknown enemy, she supposed.

She tried to imagine the uproar on Berk if she could tell them who the dreaded Dragon Rider was.

Hiccup. Skinny, screw-up Hiccup, all grown up and decidedly not dead.

She couldn't kill Hiccup.

There was something in 15 years spent together, no matter how miserable and antagonistic, that bonded her to him. He had once been her future chief, and she had hated him for it, but the idea of slitting the throat of a boy she'd chased trolls with as a child was not easy.

She could still kill him, she thought as she launched another connecting rod at the wall, so long as he wasn't Hiccup. Kill him, take the helmet as proof, head back to Berk and tell them the Dragon Master was nothing more than a man, a man she'd killed, and that they were free from his tyranny. Never mention that he was the lost heir, and bury the past behind her. She just had to convince herself he wasn't Hiccup. If he was the Dragon Rider, she could stick him tonight, once he got back from where ever he and that dragon had flown off to...

The dragon. Toothless. It probably wouldn't take well to its master being murdered. She'd have to separate them. Send him off on a midnight flight or something - no, the dragon couldn't fly alone. Not with that crippled tail...

So he really had shot down a Night Fury, all those years ago. That was one of the bigger surprises, simply because it meant reconciling Hiccup the Useless with Hiccup the whatever he was now. He'd changed over the past five years, almost enough to be unrecognisable. His jaw had levelled, he'd finally grown stubble and his face seemed longer and made up of straight lines instead of points and angles. He was a half a head taller than her, and heavier - if the glimpse of his frame she'd caught his morning as she shoved him awake was anything to go by, he was mostly lean muscle now. His bare flesh had been twisted with intricate tattoos as well, but she hadn't had time to notice the details. His voice was the only thing that had gone unchanged.

Separating him from the Night Fury. That was her goal.

Could she make him get rid of the dragon himself? She'd not seen them apart yet, even when they slept - the Night Fury lay by the mouth of the cave, ready to chase away anything that attacked in the night. Although it hadn't bothered to break up their fight last night. In retrospect, picking a fist fight with a man whose best friend was a dragon hadn't been one of her best ideas, but the

dragon had simply watched, disinterested.

Why?

She tried to see it from the dragon's perspective - his rider, the only person who can make him fly, being beaten by a fairly vicious enemy, and he does nothing. She took it back two steps - his rider bringing a new person to the cove, then fighting them. Two steps further - his rider, bringing a woman to the cove, kissing her, then wrestling and kicking and biting and screaming in the dirt.

Shit.

It all came back around. The dragon might not leave Hiccup when he was sleeping, but it knew to stay back when there was someone Hiccup planned on sleeping with. A tiny part of her wondered how many other women he's brought back to the cove.

Fuck.

She couldn't see herself seducing Hiccup any more than she could see herself killing him. She had zero experience or emotion to channel into seduction. She'd never even kissed a man, not really. She'd been kissed, against her will, more times than she'd care to admit, but never without injuring the presumptuous man as soon as she was free.

Hiccup was the latest in that list. She still hadn't had time to process that.

Maybe this would be easier than she thought. She was Astrid Hofferson. Every boy on Berk had felt something for her at some point, she was sure of it. And Hiccup had been a boy on Berk - watching her put out fires in the raids, trying to catch her attention in Dragon Training, looking away when she caught him staring at her. Perhaps she could use that. He'd seemed keen enough to kiss her the night before - if she offered, how could he refuse?

Could she even offer?

For the thousandth time, she cursed Ruffnut for leaving her in this situation. Ruff would be have been halfway home by now, Hiccup dead on the ground with his pants around his ankles. Ruff knew seduction - she'd used it to save herself from the sacrifice in the first place. Astrid sent another connecting rod into the wall with a curse to whichever god was the author of irony.

If he'd had other women, there was no way. She was too inexperienced, too painfully inexperienced, to seduce anyone who knew seduction. But if he was the Hiccup she remembered, he'd be too shocked that she willingly put her hands on him to care.

Her bicep twinged, a reminder of their scuffle last night where he'd pinned her arms above her in a skilful strangle hold. He wasn't the Hiccup she remembered, not anymore.

Frustrated, she scooped up the pile of connecting rods, all satisfactorily bent out of shape. She considered dumping them in the small lake that took up one corner of the cove, but decided it'd be more fun to see his face when he saw what she'd done.

She'd probably have to work on her anger issues if she wanted to master seduction.

She dropped the connecting rods by the mouth of the cave, where he couldn't fail to notice them, and settled down to wait. Her eyelids were heavy - she had hardly slept, watchful atop her rocks, staring at the dragon as it slept peacefully. The pile of furs looked more inviting with each sidelong glance she shot its way.

You're welcome to join me if you like, m'lady. Asshole. And what the hell was _m'lady _anyway?

She took another look at the cove - still empty. She'd already gone through his things, finding nothing of interest, and she was stuck in the cove until Hiccup deigned to return. She considered stripping down to wash in the stream, but she had no idea when Hiccup would be back and she didn't think she could kick start a seduction on such short notice.

She glanced at the furs again.

Maybe her filthy dress would ruin them, or at least make them stink of mud and moss.

Only one way to find out.

By the time she woke, the sun had slipped below the tree line, high above the edge of the cove, and the light had taken on a strange, bluish red quality. A trail of smoke led straight to the sky, and the sound of water splashing echoed off the sides of the cove.

She rolled over and pulled a fur closer around her body, before abruptly remembering where she was.

Looking up, she could see the dragon was back, sitting neatly by the edge of the lake, one foreleg extended lazily to dip into the water. Its body blocked her view of the lake proper, but judging by the disturbed water lapping at the shoreline, Hiccup was back too.

A small fire had been lit close to the cave mouth, and half a dozen fish were lined up on the coals, one side already blackened. Her mouth watered at the sight and scent, and she was suddenly reminded that she hadn't eaten since her ritual baths almost two days ago.

She was tempted to just reach out and take one straight from the fire, but something stopped her. She turned to look back at the lake - the dragon had turned its gaze towards her, cool eyes narrowed. It, quite rightly, didn't trust her.

"What're you looking at bud?"

Hiccup appeared from behind the dragon, still waist deep in water. His chest was bare and she could make out something like spreading wings in the tattoos. He looked almost happy to see her, then flattened to a neutral but pissed off expression.

"You did a good job with those connecting rods."

She shrugged, and in defiance sat down and took a fish. It singed her fingers but she didn't care.

"You did a good job destroying your own village."

She lifted the skin off easily and picked at the flesh of the fish with her fingers. She heard rather than saw him leave the water, and didn't look up until he was next to her, pulling on a new shirt with still soaking trousers.

"Does that mean we're even?"

"Nothing like it. I'm just too hungry to argue."

He sat down beside her. When she didn't try to punch him, he reached out for a fish of his own.

She hadn't eaten seafood in almost a year - the destroyed docks had meant large scale fishing was out of the question, and the smaller rod catches became a delicacy her family could never afford. The fish felt sweet and silky in her mouth, the taste hot and sour and salty, and she had to remind herself that the man who gave it to her was the one who had taken it away in the first place.

The dragon wandered over and curled around the other side of the fire, keeping an eye on Astrid.

"Where did you go?"

Hiccup gulped down a chunk of flesh to answer. "When I left Berk?"

"No, you idiot, this morning." She didn't even want to confront the five years that had turned him from Hiccup to the Dragon Rider. This morning was long enough.

"To the south. I have friends there. I'll have to go back again tomorrow too, since you ruined half of Toothless' saddle gear."

She almost asked if she could come too, then remembered who he was and why he was there and the fact that, all things going according to plan, he'd probably be dead by the next morning.

"Oh, almost forgot." He stood up, pants squelching, and grabbed a pile of cloth and fur from the edge of the cave that hadn't been there that morning. He handed it to her, careful not to brush his hand against hers.

She untangled the pile, taking a few seconds to work out what it was.

"That dress isn't exactly practical. I tried to find the same things you used to wear, but this

was the best I could get."

Scraps of cloth started to make sense as clothing - a dark red shirt, a thick fur underskirt with leather detailing, heavy wool leggings and a fur capelet.

"It gets cold around here pretty soon, so I figured warmed was better for now."

There was a small drawstring bag full of bindings and underwear. She tried not to think of who could have given him all this.

"You might want to wash first though - I left soap and some towelling cloths on one of the rocks—"

"What, so you can spy on me?"

She knew as soon as she spoke that it was too harsh. Despite everything, he was trying to help her, and she was twisting everything back against him. None of her plans would work if she kept this up.

"Wait, that was harsh." It wasn't an apology, but it was as close as he was getting. "It's... thank you."

She picked up the pile of clothes and stood. He shrugged, moving his shoulders more than necessary.

"I was going to sleep anyway - Toothless tends to start early, so..."

They both stood, awkward. Hiccup gestured at the bed.

"You can - if you want we can swap, night to night? I'm used to sleeping rough with Toothless, so..."

It was almost an invitation, but she couldn't take it just yet. Not with her plans.

"It's fine. I won't sleep for a while - I might steal a fur once you're comfortable though."

He nodded. It was progress.

"So... goodnight!"

He turned and wandered awkwardly into the cave. The dragon settled easily in front of it, shielding him from the world and her from his sight. She was still careful, slipping into the water in her dress and washing the muddy fabric while it still clung to her skin. Only once she was certain he was asleep, or at least out of sight, did she pull it off and spread it on the rocks to dry.

The water was warmer than she'd expected, and she took a moment to float and enjoy its touch against her skin, before getting to work on her hair. She carefully pulled out Ruff's pin and carelessly pulled out the rest, only to realise her hair was so filthy and matted with mud that the braids were keeping together of their own accord.

She dipped her head under, holding her breath until tendrils of hair started to float eerily around her, then started to scrub.

She was more aware of her body than ever as she pieced together her plan. She found herself appraising it as she never had before - were her breasts really as small as Ruff always said? And her legs, though shapely in the thighs were thin and brittle in the calf. Her collarbones and nipples stuck out from her flesh, although that seemed attractive enough, and the rest of her skin was smooth save for the darker hair between her legs. She'd heard of mainland whores shaving their entire bodies, and wondered briefly if those were the women Hiccup was used to.

She braided her still wet hair while she soaked, trying to create a step by step battle plan for sex and realising her complete inexperience made it impossible. Well, if nothing else, at least she'd learn something.

She was about to change into the new clothes he'd brought her when she realised how practical they were - thick and hardy and covering her from neck to knee. Hardly seductive. It was only as she packed them away that she realised that since he'd thought to get her breast bindings, he must have noticed she wasn't wearing them before. That was encouraging, if nothing else.

The air had cooled, and though she was loathe to put on wet clothing, she did anyway, pulling the virgin's dress back over her head. She'd done her best but the mud and grass stains hadn't faded fully, marring the white with darker streaks. It felt appropriate.

She felt the dragon's eyes on her as she stole a lump of charcoal from the smouldering fire pit and used it in place of kohl, tracing around her eyes and colouring the lids with a smudged finger. Liking the difference it made, she traced swirls and patterns to her arms and torso, and fine lines along her neck. She bit down on her lips to add colour and slid Ruff's pin back into her braids before giving herself a final appraisal.

The damp fabric clung close to her frame rather than flowing around it, giving outlines where before there had been mere hints. The charcoal lines gave her an otherworldly quality, and she liked it - she could pretend to be Freya as she told herself he was the traitorous Dragon Rider. She was as close to ready as she could imagine being.

The dragon watched her as she slid past, into the cave, steeling herself and muttering "This time. This time for sure."

6. Offering

****AN:** Hey guys, not usually the sort for author's notes, but I just wanted to say how much I appreciate all the follows and kind reviews. I'm absolutely flattered. I've also just caved and gotten a writing tumblr (thaipothetical-situations) so check it out if you're interested.**

****Now,** back to the good stuff...**

* * *

><p>He knew it was only a matter of time before he started dreaming about her again.<p>

Before he'd left Berk, when he was skinny and useless, she'd visited him in slumber, all calm words and smooth hands and soft hair. When he was younger, she'd just sit with him and talk, or occasionally side with him in a fight instead of giving him that pitying look she did in real life whenever he opened his mouth or screwed something up. When he'd hit his teenage years and his body had started craving her in far less innocent ways, the dreams had taken a sharp turn to the erotic, but she was still softly spoken and kind. She guided him through the motions, uncaring of his inexperience and somehow both masterful and innocent herself. He could remember a hundred nights waking in a cold sweat, dreams ended abruptly, and looking out the window to her house a hundred yards away, wanting her more than anything.

Even once he'd left Berk behind, she'd stayed with him. In those first rough few months, dreams of her had been the only thing to bring him joy apart from flying. The first time he'd woken panting and aching, Toothless had been worried, nudging him with a nose as if to ask what was wrong. Hiccup had been mortified and the dragon had rolled its eyes and slunk away once it realised he was in heat. Toothless didn't know many human words, but he recognised Astrid as something closely associated with desire. Even if Hiccup tried to keep quiet as he beat a rhythm with his hand and chased relief, he had moaned it often enough in his sleep for Toothless to recognise.

And now, five years later, she was the only constant. In all the worlds he'd seen, the battles he'd fought, the people he'd known, she still tormented him in sleep. Even after he'd accepted that she was probably married with another man's child in her belly, the dream Astrid remained as soft and smooth as she always had. She had aged with him, and his predictions had turned out to be more or less accurate - longer hair (although she parted it to the left, not right), a smoother, wider face, thicker hips and thighs. Fuller lips, however the dream had her using them. On the rare occasion that his mind sent another woman sprawling beneath him, she was still there - watching, guiding, even participating.

And now she was real and sleeping on the other side of the cove and he couldn't do a damn thing about it. He'd thought she'd come willingly but as far as she was concerned, he'd kidnapped her to rape and hurt and do whatever he pleased with. Some romance this was turning out to be.

He hadn't recalled falling asleep but he must have, because there she was, waking him into a dream with a brush of fingertips across the back of his neck.

He turned his head to one side, opening his eyes to see a newer, realer Astrid - one wearing her muddy wedding gown and smeared with charcoal like some deity. The details he'd had wrong over the past five years were righted, but his mind had still taken some liberties. Her flowing dress now clung close along every contour of her body, pert breast and nipples visible through thin fabric,

free of undergarments, her eyes dark and half lidded. She bit her bottom lip and ran her fingers up into the edge of his hair and it was somehow the most erotic thing he'd ever seen.

He lifted himself up to one side and created space for her on the furs. Dream Astrid would usually have straddled him by now, but he wasn't sure where his mind was taking him this time. Everything felt more real and clear and at the same time somehow less so.

She leaned forward, resting a knee on the pallet and using her grip on the back of his neck to pull him up to meet her. His mouth was already open when she paused, lips an inch from his. He could feel the heat of her skin and the brush of her fringe against his brow, and wanted to dive forward and take her like in all his other dreams combined. But something held him back, and he suddenly realised she was hesitating.

Hesitant Astrid. That was new.

He exhaled curiously and it broke the spell - feeling his breath against her mouth was enough to make her press forward against his lips. The kiss was chaste, lips meeting without motion or intention. He wanted desperately to deepen it, but again he resisted.

She was in charge tonight.

She pulled away, keeping her hand on his neck possessively, and seemed to evaluate the kiss. She brought her free hand up and pressed her fingertips against her lips, before running her tongue over them as if chasing the taste.

Then she yanked his face back to hers and crashed their lips back together.

This time, there was urgency instead of hesitance - her lips moved almost frantically against his, sloppy and uncertain but enthusiastic and soft. She clambered fully onto the pallet and twisted her fingers through his hair, tugging sharply. The quick flash of pain was more real than ever.

He threaded one hand into her braids, knowing they'd be ruined, and gripped her upper arm with the other, smudging the black lines against her skin. Her kisses never let up for a second as she drew herself onto her knees, at her full height, leaning over him. The frantic pace faded into something more rhythmic, more controlled, but no less intense.

Her mouth was open so he swiped his tongue against her teeth and she jumped, separating their lips with a lewd smack. She stared at him, eyes wide, then glanced over her shoulder, twisting her torso and sending her breasts into profile and his mind to some far distant place. He wanted to taste her skin, see if it was as damp and silky as it smelled.

She turned back, her eyes low and narrow.

"Do that again."

They were the first words she'd spoken, and he was more than happy to oblige. He slid the hand out of her braids and cupped her cheek, drawing her face closer, slowly and sensually. Impatient, she smacked their lips together of their own accord, then waited for him to move.

She hadn't opened her mouth, so he ran his tongue gently over the crease of her lips. In something like a sigh, they parted and she softened against him, the hand in his hair sliding down to rest on his shoulder. He smoothed his lips against hers and ran his tongue along her teeth, and suddenly her own tongue was swiping against his aggressively. The kiss swallowed a groan but he couldn't be sure which of them it had come from. Her other hand had come up to stroke the skin of his chest, curling against him when he deepened the kiss again, heat unfurling deep in his body, and his grip on her arm slid down to the small of her back.

She jolted again, separating them and throwing a glance over her shoulder once more. Toothless, he realised. She was looking at Toothless.

Toothless wasn't usually in these dreams, but Astrid never acknowledged him either.

"Get rid of the dragon," she commanded. Dream Astrid didn't usually command, but maybe it was the effect of spending time with actual Astrid.

"He's...he's his own being - I can't order him."

She scowled, and shoved his shoulder, sending him sprawling against the bed. He'd pushed himself up into a half sitting position when she crawled onto his lap and ran a hand temptingly along a

tattoo.

"Get rid of it."

He could feel the heat of her resting against him and couldn't tell if she'd carried the skirt of the dress with her or was bare against his pants, and knew he couldn't resist.

"Toothless," he said through gritted teeth, unsure if he could manage full sentences.

The dragon, woken from its slumber by the sound of its name, took one look at the situation and slunk off to sleep somewhere else.

"That's more like it."

She turned back towards him and unknowingly twisted her hips. He hissed and buried his face in her neck.

She looked down to him, almost concerned, then repeated the motion. He was already hard, but she had probably been unaware of it until now. She looked down again, at the point where her hips met his, and furrowed her brows.

That was weird. Dream Astrid never faltered at this point. She always knew exactly what she was doing and exactly what it was doing to him.

"Is that...?"

She twisted again, deeper this time, and suddenly her face broke in a sharp gasp. Unable to manage words, he nodded fervently and reached for her breasts.

She batted his hand away and pushed him back, so he was lying while she sat over him, in all senses. A hand trailed onto his chest, tracing the tattoos with feather light touches. Her other hand joined it, pressing a flat open palm against his skin, sliding smoothly over the lean muscle before moving up to trace the bite marks she'd left in his shoulder the night before. His breathing became shallow as she drew her bottom lip into her mouth, teeth sinking in to swollen flesh - admiring her handiwork. He ran his tongue over his lips, still tasting her. She twisted again, and this time he jolted up against her, grasping at her hip - his back arched, and so did hers, pushing up and forwards and feeling like she was pulling his soul out of his throat. Her name slipped through his lips without his permission.

She froze, still resting over him, her hands slowing against his skin. Her eyes, almost black with desire, shrank a little to blue, as if she'd suddenly realised what she was doing.

He didn't know what stopped her, but she seemed almost afraid.

Gently, he took one of the hands from his chest and brought it up to his lips, kissing the palm lightly. Her face softened, then became devious, and for a moment he thought she was about to grind against him again - but instead she leaned forward, bending at the hips and pressing the front of her body against his. His hand, holding hers, was trapped between them, resting against her breast. He could feel her heartbeat through her flesh, fast and uneven.

She didn't kiss him, like he'd expected, but leaned further, brushing her lips against the shell of his ear. She inhaled, as if about to speak, then let the breath go in silence. Her spare hand reached up into her hair, as if feeling for the ties of her braid.

"Do you want me?"

Gods, he almost came at the sound of those words and her voice so close to his skin. Instead, he thrust up into her and moaned, loving and cursing the fact that the real Astrid's presence had turned his dream woman into a torturer.

She ground down on him in response and let out a broken breath into his ear. Her hand was still in her hair. He released his grip on her hip to help her untangle the braid, but she grabbed his hand and pulled it between them, pressing it against her clothed breast instead. He squeezed roughly, feeling the nipple harden against his palm, and she moaned into his ear in response. Her hand slid back into her hair as she panted, trying to get her breath back while he ran his fingers over her sensitive flesh through the fabric.

Gods, she wasn't even naked.

She let his fingers play against her, guiding him with moans and sharp intakes of breathe, before swallowing and delivering the killing blow.

"Take me back to Berk, and you can have me."

Everything shattered into reality. The warm press of her flesh, the subtle shifting of her skin, the moist air of her breath.

She was real.

He sat up abruptly, hissing at the friction it created, trying to shove her off without hurting her. Gods, she was real - from her kiss swollen lips to her peaked nipples, to - gods, was that a damp patch on the dress, between her legs?

Shit!

He threw himself from the bed, not caring if she landed roughly on the furs. He needed to get out, get away from the temptation she offered. He stalked out of the cave and across the cove, confliction running through his body as he abandoned the warmth of her body for the biting cold midnight air against his exposed skin. Just thinking of her soft flesh was enough to cause a spike of renewed arousal, telling him to turn around and just take what was offered.

No. He was not indulging that.

He whistled, sharp and short, and Toothless' head lifted on the other side of the lake. The dragon had barely stood by the time Hiccup was swinging himself into the saddle and urging them to the sky.

They flew barely two minutes, Toothless landing on a sandy beach and curling up again to sleep, leaving his foolish human to whatever he needed to do. Judging by his state of undress and the heavy smell of arousal, it was worse than usual. The female probably had something to do with it, although from what he'd heard, it seemed like she was the lover his rider had paid tribute to these last five years. Although _Astrid _could be interchangeable. He didn't know - he was a dragon.

Hiccup barely made it off the sand before falling to his knees and wrenching down his pants. In the moment of clarity between relief and guilt, he realised that shuddering alone to the idea of Astrid didn't bring a fraction of what he felt at the sight of her biting her bottom lip.

7. Fight or Flight

"Did she speak with you?"

"Yes."

Ruffnut could tell, even from a distance, that Snoutlout had to contain the relief on his face.

Ever since she was a child, Ruff had feared the Council - usually because she was only brought before them when she and her brother had done something worthy of punishment. They sat in the darkness of the hall even in brightest day, preferring torchlight to the sun, and drank their way through the hours.

When she was small, Stoick the Vast had presided, and dismissed their destruction as youthful enthusiasm. Once they were teenagers, she and Tuff had been sentenced to weeks of scrubbing paving stones and building barns. When she'd been found on the boat, she'd had to stand before them and beg for her life.

And now, she spied on her friend for them.

Normally, a woman wouldn't be allowed to speak before the Council. Her husband or father would speak for her, but since she had neither, she spoke for herself.

"What did she say about the Dragon Rider?"

Snoutlout sat sandwiched between Stoick and Spitelout. Technically, he sat to the chief's right and his father was merely an adviser, but the questions solely came from them. Since Hiccup's death, the ruling line had fallen to the Jorgensons, and they had taken it long before Stoick was rightfully dead. The chief, who'd inspired such fear and awe in them as children, was nothing but

a figurehead now.

"She said he wouldn't want me to know anything about him, but that wasn't why she wouldn't tell me. Say she 'respects him'. Only other thing I got was that sometimes he's so serious he won't talk for days."

"And the ceasefire, would she say anything on that?"

"Says she trusts him. Says it's our best hope at peace."

"Do you believe her?"

Stoick's voice, though quiet, could still cut through the council like a knife. Perhaps he wasn't the useless puppet she assumed.

Ruff didn't even have to think about the answer.

"Yes."

She explained the pin, the significance of it, the fact that Astrid Hofferson had had the chance to kill him and had chosen his peace instead. She's thought it would convinced them - instead, Spitelout snorted into a drink.

"She's the weak slut I always thought she was. Tamed by the Dragon Rider into a willing wife." He elbowed his son. "Good thing you didn't get her like you wanted. One decent fuck and she'd be useless."

Snoutlout tried to keep a level face. His father was drunk. And whichever line would have given the chieftom to him, he had always wanted to be a better man than his bitter father. As he spoke, Ruff could see the words had been hanging heavy on his mind.

"The man controls dragons with the blink of an eye. What says he can't control people?"

Spitelout latched onto this idea like a leech. "That's why he wants to peace talks - to hypnotise our leaders and have us give him Berk!"

The Council embraced the thought, shouting angrily and calling themselves to arms. Ruff scowled - thank the gods they were too drunk to actually do anything, or Berk would have spent the past five years at war with trees and the winter.

She glared at Snoutlout until he looked back, and jerked her head into a corner. She heard one of the Council members, probably another uncle of Snoutlout's, catcalling her gesture, but she couldn't care less - she'd been called far worse things by far better people.

"This is bullshit. You know as well as I do."

Snoutlout frowned and checked over his shoulder. Ruff didn't bother - the Council members probably assumed he planned to bend her over a table and fuck her in the corner, and would leave them be. One advantage of a spoiled reputation.

"He controls dragons Ruff. Dragons. Astrid was tough, but—"

"Astrid_ is_ tough. It took an entire village to tie her to those posts - she wouldn't be a slave to one man, in mind or body."

"Slaves are rarely willing Ruff," he said, drawing himself to his full height. He stopped and slouched back down when he remembered she was taller than him, and hesitated before his next question.

"Is she with-child?"

Ruff shook her head. "If she is, she doesn't know it."

Relief broke through Snoutlout's face, and she couldn't help crushing that too.

"Don't make grand plans though. She isn't pure."

"As if I didn't know."

"She isn't unwilling in that either."

His jaw dropped. "She told you?"

"No. She didn't. And if Astrid was forced into anything, she'd rail against it into all four winds." She was sliding past when she whispered her last words.

"That short hair makes it much easier to see the bite marks."

* * *

><p>She was waiting for him when he came back, in the blue stained light before dawn, ready to fight.<p>

She'd dressed herself in her new clothes as soon as she'd come to her senses, and scowled as she stripped the pallet of its two best furs to make a bed of her own on the rocks. She hadn't intended to sleep, had meant to catch him the minute he returned and break his fingers one by one until he took her home, but her head had other ideas and sent her into a fitful slumber.

In her dreams, they were back where they'd left off, only how many hands did he have because surely two weren't enough to be causing that much feeling over so much of her body. He thrust up into her again, striking a dampness she hadn't expected between her legs, and rolling against what felt like her entire body. Her thighs clenched around his hips and the words seemed to tumble from her lips without the safeguard of her brain.

"Come home."

Ruff would have laughed at the double meaning.

Breathing against his lips in the dream as he held her hips and drove up into her, she finally admitted what she had known in the heat of the moment.

She couldn't kill him. She could seduce him, it seemed, but not kill him.

If anything, the seduction part had gone perfectly, up to the point where he'd thrown her off and literally run away. Maybe he was as clueless as her. Although his hands had certainly known what they were doing. Then again, so had hers.

She had hesitated before asking him to take her home. She should have kept quiet, but if she wasn't going to kill him she felt she had to ask something other than mere pleasure for sacrificing her morals and giving herself to him. She could have stayed silent, born out the union and slowly convinced him over nights and weeks that she belonged on Berk. That he did too, even if he'd attacked his own, because there had to be a reason for that that he wasn't telling her, didn't there?

He wasn't vicious. He wasn't cruel. And yet here she was, a virgin bride for a monster, stuck in a cove on the other side of nowhere.

He must have returned and gone again while she slept, because when he landed just before dawn, he was wearing his full flight suit, and Toothless looked more vicious than he ever had in the cove.

It was the flight suit that did it. All the memories of panicked raids and wild attacks, led by that figure, brushed aside anything she might have felt for the man beneath it.

He landed close to the cave, but had to pass her rocks to reach the lake. As soon as he was in range, she threw herself at him, using her weight to push him to the ground and driving a fist into his jaw.

Maybe his reflexes were out. Maybe he wanted the punishment. But he took the strike instead of dodging.

"Back from destroying my village?"

She pulled off his helmet, threw it to the side, and twisted her fingers through his hair, pulling sharply. He let out a half strangled groan of pain, and she tried not to think of the other groans he'd made when she'd had him pinned down earlier that night.

"Had fun destroying children's homes?"

He didn't respond. She yanked at his hair again, getting an "ahhh!" this time. His eyes scrunched up and for the first time, she was struck by how defeated he looked. She could, conceivably, have continued beating him until he was a bloody stain in the mud - but there was something unseemly about beating someone who wasn't fighting back.

She scowled and released him. "Coward," she hissed and stalked back towards her rocks. She had to pass the dragon to get there, and snarled at it - it snarled back.

Hiccup just stepped to the lake's edge and began to wash his face. Crouched atop the rocks, Astrid watched, carefully, for any sudden moves. There were none.

"They left you on those cliffs." He didn't face her, but his voice was low and even and somehow filled the entire cove. "They tied you up for a quick death at best. They were willing for you to be raped, and beaten, and sacrificed, so they could end an inconvenience."

He straightened, stiffly, and looked over at her.

"Why would you ever want to go back?"

She thought she didn't need an answer. She didn't want to admit that she didn't have one.

"I've had a long night," he said, calmly, "so I'd appreciate if you didn't try to fuck me in my sleep this time."

Astrid was about to launch herself at him again when a ball of fire exploded through the cove, lighting the rock walls and setting her whole world on fire.

She barely had time to look into the air before it was thick with dragons - huge, unfamiliar ones, with sharp snouts and horns and explosive orange fire. Hiccup grabbed his helmet and swung onto Toothless' back, sliding his foot into the pedal without a second thought, and was about to take to the sky when he remembered her.

"Come on!"

She would have fought, or argued, if another fireball hadn't hit a rock two feet to her left and disintegrated it. Chunks of boiling rock flew, two sinking into her arm and she screamed as she ran, cradling her injuries. Hiccup offered a hand and she took it, swinging behind him in the saddle and clinging onto him with her uninjured arm.

"Let's go bud!"

Toothless shot into the sky and suddenly the world was full of dragons, screeching and clawing and seeking out her flesh. She buried her face in the back of Hiccup's suit, trying to protect it from injury, but a wing claw caught her skin and suddenly half her face was on fire. She screamed, knowing no one could hear her.

Toothless pushed up through the crowded sky, loosing blast after blast of fire to clear the way, only to have his path crowded over within seconds. There was a snapping sound from somewhere near her left leg, and a sharp shriek of steel.

Finally, after more than a minute of suffocation, he loosed a final shot and saw daybreak on the other side. He let loose a final burst of speed and shot through the gap and up into the clouds. Astrid didn't see any of it - all she saw was Hiccup's suit and the back of her own eyelids as she screamed and sobbed and wished it could all be over.

"You can stop screaming now."

Through the helmet, his voice sounded different - rounded and muffled. He must have yelled to be heard over her screaming. Beneath her, she could feel Toothless' path slow and even out to horizontal. She closed her mouth and opened her eyes tentatively. The dark leather of Hiccup's suit had taken on an orange-gold sheen.

She risked looking out, and her mouth fell open of its own accord.

The last time she'd flown on the back of a dragon, it had stolen her away from her home and she had been stuck looking down at the endless miles of ocean. This time, she was caught between blue and orange clouds as the sun began to spill over the horizon.

She slowly unwrapped the legs she didn't realise she'd clenched around Hiccup, and kept her eyes

moving, not wanting to miss a single detail of the clouds. As Toothless banked close to one, she tentatively reached out a hand to touch it. It was cold, and damp, and the opposite of what it looked it would feel like, but the very idea that she could feel the clouds was addictive, and she stretched out her injured arm too, burying her fingers in the wind.

Toothless must have realised what she was doing, because he started to weave through the clouds, keeping them close, and shot a look back to her that might have almost been a smile.

A drip of blood against her collar bone reminded her of the gash on her cheek, and she reached up to check it. Shallow, but still bleeding. It would probably scar. Looking at the back of Hiccup's flight suit guiltily, she realised it was smeared with her blood.

The injury brought her sharply back to reality. The attack.

"Why did those dragons attack?"

Hiccup turned as far as he could in the saddle and was about to answer when he saw her face.

"Gods - bud, take us down!"

Toothless sunk back through the clouds, Astrid unable to resist running her fingers through them as they went. Back below the clouds, the morning light began to stain the sky. The landing was rough, less controlled than a simple glide, and Astrid remembered the snap and screech of steel from earlier.

They landed atop a cliff made of white stone, and Astrid wondered if she had left Midguard for some strange world where people could hold clouds and stone was white. Hiccup dismounted immediately and offered her a hand, sitting her down on the grass as he rummaged through a saddlebag to pull out a water flask. On a second thought, he pulled out another smaller flask with it.

"Drink this," he said, passing her the smaller one. She opened it and sniffed - something sharp and alcoholic. "It's whiskey," he explained, and when that brought no recognition, added, "alcohol, for the pain."

She took a swig and gagged, coughing it back up. He sighed and took the flask from her.

"It's not like mead or ale," he said, lifting it to his lips and taking a small nip. "You have to sip it."

He handed it back and she mimicked his actions. It filled her throat with fire and she decided she liked it.

He soaked a small bandage with water and pressed it against her cheek, dabbing away the blood as she winced and swore. Then he took the whiskey flask from her - noticeably emptier than before - and soaked the bandage in that. This time, she flinched and snarled as he ran the cloth over her skin.

"Is this revenge?" She asked once she could talk through the pain.

"No, it stops infection." He handed her back the whiskey and she took a grateful sip before remembering her earlier question.

"Why would dragons attack you?"

He sighed and sat down heavily beside her. Toothless, who had been happy to stand back and watch her suffering, came close and curled around them, Hiccup automatically leaning back into him.

"Because good dragons, under the control of bad people, do bad things."

She thought of her village burning, and the docks on fire and her own home in pieces, and thought she understood.

"They must have followed me back. I thought I'd lost them, but I hadn't."

"They turned on you."

Hiccup frowned, confused. "No, I was trying to help them."

She snorted. "Is that what you tell yourself? When you rally them to attack Berk?" She took another nip of whiskey and realised that it made her feel like she had earlier that night - hot and muddy and not entirely in control but somehow entirely truthful.

Hiccup grabbed her drinking arm in a bruising grip.

"I was protecting you."

"How? By stealing me away and hiding me away in a cove and refusing to take me home?"

"Not just you - Berk."

She scowled and spat at him. "You think you were protecting us? You were what we needed protection from! Do you know how many people died in your raids?"

"How many?"

"What?" She went to take another sip of whiskey but he took the flask, drinking it himself.

"How many people have died in my raids?"

She tried to think - the whiskey had made her memories muddled. There was... old Flatfoot? No, he'd died of illness. Meatmouth? Stabbed by his wife during a raid, but only when she found out he'd been sleeping with Standsore's wife. Kilkain had died in a fire, but it was when a log from his own heath had rolled and burned down the house.

The more she thought about it, the less it seemed like anyone had even been hurt in those attacks.

"Then why were you attacking at all?" Hiccup rolled his eyes. She scowled and snatched back the flask. "And before you go on about how stupid I am, remember I'm not the Astrid that knows everything and reads your thoughts, cos she doesn't exist."

He bit his lip and sighed. "I said. To protect you. To protect Berk."

"Protecting us by attacking us?"

"No. By isolating you." He reached forward, she thought for the flask. Instead, he took her hands and folded them into his.

"You need to understand, Astrid - the world is so much bigger than what we know. Berk, the archipelagos, that's just an insignificant dot on a map to these people. They want to own to world and everything on it and they have dragons to conquer it for them."

He looked down at her hands, but didn't let go.

"I thought... if I could cut you off from the sea, maybe you could go unnoticed. If there were no torches, no battlements, they'd leave Berk alone if they found it, and you could all go on living without even knowing what they would do if they found you."

She didn't speak, so he filled the silence.

"I stopped the dragons taking food, or killing. If anything, it looks better now than it did when I started. And... and they're all there, and safe, and if Drago ever attacks I don't know if I could defend it alone but I'd try, I swear I would—"

The words took a moment to sink in through the pain and the whiskey, but he held her hands until she gently drew them away. His head dropped, resigned, until she took one hand in both of hers and placed it gently against her cheek.

It was the whiskey, he told himself as he smoothed his thumb against her skin, the whiskey for both of them. He sighed and leaned into her, lifting a hand to her other cheek to pull her in further—

She squealed and jumped away, putting a hand to her cheek as he realised too late that he'd tried to cup her injured skin.

"Sorry. I just... and before, and..."

They both blushed, unsure how to broach the topic of... whatever earlier that night had been. A

tryst? She liked the sound of a tryst, it made her seem more experienced than she was. With the surging confidence of the whiskey in her veins, she finally spoke.

"You can still take me home."

Hiccup groaned and thunked his head back against Toothless. She couldn't tell if that was a good thing.

"Astrid, I can't take you back."

Not a good thing then.

"Why not?"

"Because you know who I am."

She slid closer to him, and rested a hand against his shoulder. "I could explain. I could explain for you and you could come home, and your father - Hiccup, he needs you now more than ever. And if people are going to attack, the whole tribe needs you."

"Not if I can stop them attacking in the first place."

Astrid scowled. "You don't stop thieves by tearing down walls Hiccup." She left a second of silence, then tried again. "I could keep it a secret."

He shook his head. "Do you really think they'd let you get away that easily? The Council would want you to talk, and if you wouldn't they'd make you, and then - Astrid, what if Drago found out about you? What if Berk tells the world they had a sacrifice for me, and I took it, and then they hunted you down to get to me? I... I can't bear the idea of you being hurt."

It was as close to a confession as she was getting, and it was mostly the whiskey anyway.

"Besides, you know what Berk would do with a soiled bride."

She did. At best, she could become a concubine, a sexual plaything for a powerful man. They would never let her marry. And she could never be a shieldmaiden.

"We'll sleep here," he announced, changing the subject and fetching a blanket from the saddlebag. He draped it over her and she settled down against Toothless' side, too sleepy or drunk to care.

"Not soiled yet," she muttered under her breath.

"That wouldn't matter to them." She hadn't expected him to hear her. There was a tone of regret to his words.

The alcohol in her blood surged, and she couldn't stop the words coming.

"Stop acting like you didn't enjoy it."

He sighed and settled down beside her, a respectable distance away. She wasn't sure if she dreamed his next words.

"I will when you stop acting like you did."

8. Explanations

The sun woke her at midday, with a sharp headache and stinging cheek.

She wrestled herself from the tangle she'd made of the blanket in her sleep and realised how much closer Hiccup was than she remembered. They'd both curled in towards one another, rested against the dragon's side, and boy and dragon slept on. In his sleep, Hiccup looked younger - closer to his true age - and his usually furrowed brow was smooth.

They should have arranged a watch, she thought, standing and stretching. Granted, it was the first decent rest she'd had in days, but the whiskey that had soothed her sleep had come back with a vengeance.

Her stomach growled, almost loud enough to wake the others, and she leaned up to sort through the

saddle bags. Her fingers closed around the whiskey flask, and she half considered finishing it off to try and chase the headache she already had, before her nails brushed against bread. She pulled it out, a thin round roll, and almost bit into it before she realised. She stopped, pulled it from her lips and swore.

It was Lettagar's bread. Little old redheaded Lettagar, who baked the bread on Berk.

So he had been back.

She bit into it, furious, the slightly damp taste only confirming her suspicions. She'd eaten this bread her whole life, and here it was now. Fresh too - it took less than two days to go stale. Her mother had always complained about that and her father had always pointed out that it was always eaten before that was an issue - yet here it was, fresh.

He must have flown there after he'd rejected her.

She wanted to shove him, wake him up and demand an explanation - if he was so worried about Berk then why would he take a Night Fury there only two days after her disappearance? And how did he expect the conquerers he feared not to notice the frequency of his visits, his fixation with the island? And why would he not take her back, if he was willing to sneak in himself?

For some reason though, she held back her fists and took the time to look at him.

He needed to shave, she decided. His stubble was at risk of becoming an actual beard, and for some reason she couldn't reconcile the idea of Hiccup with a beard. Although she had no issue with stubble.

A sharp memory of the rough scratch of his chin against her cheek as she whispered in his ear came to mind, sending a jolt to her chest and warmth somewhere lower. She tried to ignore it, but the longer she looked, the stronger it became. His hair fell softly around his face, mussed up with wind, and as she watched, his lips puckered slightly in sleep, a worried expression flitting across his face. The more details she took in, the less she could deny it.

Hiccup had grown into a very handsome man.

That much she would admit. Some darker corner of her brain probed the possibility that she was attracted to him, but she fought it down, arguing that subjective attractiveness did not necessarily mean she was attracted. Besides, there was the sordid history between them - angry teenaged years, anger at being carried off, anger at his rejection of her offers... actually, it felt strange not to be angry at him for once.

She supposed it was because he'd come clean, to some degree. She thought about what he'd said earlier, grasping her hands and kneeling to hold sincere eye contact. He hadn't attacked Berk, but isolated it. Tried to protect it. Was willing to -

He groaned in his sleep, tearing her from her thoughts. His face scrunched, and whatever he was dreaming, it was unpleasant. She was almost tempted to leave him to it, but as she pushed her bangs to the side, her hand brushed against the gash across her cheek, reminding her of the tender care he'd taken with it.

She slid back beneath the blanket, enjoying its warmth against the chill coastal air, and shuffled over, closer to him. Whatever enemies he faced in sleep, they were getting worse - his mouth opened, letting out small, pained noises, and his limbs began to shift. Not knowing anything better to do, she wrapped an arm around his shoulder and let his head rest against her breast. For a moment, it seemed to make things worse - his struggling increased, arms reaching out - then he latched onto her waist, tugging her close and holding her desperately.

His breathing began to slow and even out, his head relaxing against her, and she wondered when he'd last been held. Definitely not in those first fifteen years - his mother had died before she was born, and Stoick had never seemed the sort for affection. She was left to wonder again if he had taken lovers since he left, and became stuck on the question as to whether she would count as one.

She felt less conflicted holding him than she had in days. There was something simple in seeing him fall back into even sleep against her, and she could honestly say in that moment that she didn't hate him.

They still had five years to clear - why he had left, what he had seen, who these invaders were that he was so desperate to avoid he would destroy his home. How he had come to control dragons in

the first place. The tiny black part of her mind added the question of lovers to the list as well. But for now, he was peaceful, and it seemed enough to let him sleep.

* * *

><p>When he finally awoke, it was with a start and a jump away, followed by stuttered apologies. She had rolled her eyes and laughed shakily and shoved off the blanket to stand beside him.<p>

"It's okay," she said. "You weren't sleeping well. I was just trying to hold you down."

It was only a partial lie. He had woken with his cheek pressed to her breast and feared the worst - that he had taken her offer and promised to take her home with no intention of fulfilling his end of the bargain. The idea that she would hold him down when his nightmares became too much filled his chest with something close to sunlight, and made him quietly grateful that it had been a nightmare and not an Astrid related dream.

It was only once Toothless was woken too that he saw the problem.

"It's bent," he said, examining the tail rig. Astrid leaned over him, inspecting it herself despite knowing nothing about it. He tried not to feel her breasts pressing into his shoulder.

"I think I heard it during the attack," she said, straightening. "A sort of snap."

"I didn't even notice. He glides so well without it these days."

Toothless watched their conversation, trying to discern their meaning. He already knew full well he couldn't fly - he'd felt as they'd landed, rough and uneven - but it was their next step he was interested in.

Hiccup pulled a notebook out of the saddle and began to unfold it, feeling quietly proud when Astrid's eyes widened.

"What's that?"

He folded out the last pages, the map taking up a good few square feet of grass.

"My map." When she said nothing, he added, "I didn't sit around in the cove for five years."

"I can see that," she breathed, tracing a finger along it. "Is that Berk?"

She pointed to an island far to the east, marked Bloodstone.

"No, Berk's here," he said, pointing it out. "It says so right there." He pointed at the label. She shrugged.

"I can't read."

His heart dropped. "But... but you read the Book of Dragons?!"

She shrugged again. "I had my grandmother read it to me since I was small. By the time I was ten, I knew it by heart." She surveyed the map again. "That's a B, isn't it? I know some of the runes."

He nodded, still dealing with the idea that something he considered so basic and essential had been completely unknown to Astrid.

"Where are we now?"

Her question shook him out of his shock, and he pointed to white marked cliffs.

"Here. In Angle territory." He pointed to another spot, slightly to the right, marked with a green circle. "And this is where we're going."

"What is it?"

"Safe. Somewhere we can fix the rig and get back in the air. It should only be about three days on foot."

Her mouth dropped open. "Three days?!"

He shrugged. "It'd be five minutes if Toothless could fly, but if he could we wouldn't even be going there." He paused, folding up the map and sliding it onto Toothless' saddle. "Although I'm not sure how I'm gonna explain you to Rhea."

She stopped, suddenly, and shot him a questioning look. "Rhea? Who's that?"

"My mother."

* * *

<p>On reflection, he spent most of the next three days explaining things.<p>

"Of course she's not my real mother," had come first, as they walked along the edge to the cliff towards a path he'd marked from the air. "She acts like she is though. Started telling people I was her long lost son so they'd stop asking questions about me."

"She's tall," had come next, "with dark hair. Looks like she could be my mother, maybe. She's a gold smith, designs trinkets and little bits of jewellery, weapons detailing sometimes too. Her husband was a blacksmith, but he died years ago - so she has a forge she hardly uses. That's where we can fix the rig."

The next didn't come until sundown, as they fought their way through blackberry brambles.

"I designed it myself. Built it in the forge while the village was sleeping. It's come a long way since then, but the idea's still the same - using a pedal to go through the positions, trying to match what the other half already does."

"This was back during dragon training, right?" He nodded. "So that time I saw you at the forge at night, that was...?"

"Extremely awkward, and yes. He was there."

She had looked over at Toothless. "I wonder if he remembers me from then?"

He shrugged. "Probably not. He was chasing a sheep. He doesn't have much of an attention span."

Explanations on Toothless came next, and took hours. He talked and talked and went back and forth and still felt like he was missing things. She was quiet for most of it, listening intently, occasionally asking for more detail.

When they stopped to set up camp, he'd been exhausted. They'd only walked a handful of miles but he felt as if he'd lived the years over again, and hadn't stopped speaking the whole time. When she offered to take first watch, he was suspicious, until he saw Toothless settle down and decided that if the dragon could trust her, he could too.

His sleep was haunted with dark flames and dragon blood, and he woke clinging to Astrid, her arm solid around him. He had peeled himself away, reluctantly, and although she curled towards him in her sleep, she was still nowhere near as close as he needed her.

The next morning, the questions came hard and fast.

"Why did you leave Berk?"

They'd camped next to a stream and Toothless had plucked three fish out and roasted them in one breath. They ate as they walked, fingers hot and sticky. He wiped his mouth against the back of his hand and tried to think of the best way to answer.

"I couldn't do it," he finally said. "I couldn't kill a dragon. Not Toothless, not the Nightmare, not any of them. So as soon as the village was drunk and Dad was happy, I decided to just... disappear."

She was silent, so he continued.

"I couldn't leave the dragons there though, knowing you'd kill the Nightmare even if I was gone. So I grabbed a sheep and tried to lure them out, but they didn't trust me and Toothless had to intervene, and—"

"I nearly followed you."

"What?"

She stopped to pick a bone out of her fish, leaving him hanging with every second.

"I was furious - I had some big idea about following you into the forest and finding out whatever you were doing and maybe cutting off your arm or something so they'd make me the Dragon Training champion. But Ruff stole a wine cask and offered to split it with me, so I didn't." She snorted. "Fine mess that would have been. He would have ripped me to pieces."

She looked at Toothless, and he realised that although her discomfort around Toothless was gone, she was still frightened of him.

"No he wouldn't have. I would have stopped him."

"Why?"

He thought for a moment, then threw caution to the wind. "You might not have realised, but I had a pretty big crush on you back then."

She threw her head back and laughed for a solid minute, and it was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen.

Her next questions were about the world - the places he'd seen, the people, the smells and sound of different worlds. He realised, through her questions, that she'd barely ever left Berk, never for more than a week or two on a fishing expedition, and had no idea there were people other than Vikings and villages they raided from time to time.

Eventually, he started asking questions of his own. About Berk, his father, Gobber. Some she'd answered happily - Gobber was well, although losing his sight with age, and had managed to build double ended swords by accident when he couldn't tell which end of a pommel was which. Others, like those about his father, she was less forthcoming on.

"I suppose Snoutlout is heir now," he said, trying to coax her into mentioning his father.

"He is."

"Well, that's a shame."

Astrid shook her head. "He's not that bad. He's grown up. Doesn't want to be his father. Actually listens to Stoick, so that's something you never did."

He bristled. "I listened plenty."

Astrid sighed. "You listened to half of what he said Hiccup, half at best. No, I take that back - you must have heard everything he said except _don't."_"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't try to fight dragons Hiccup, don't leave the house during a raid, don't chase trolls over the wood bridges in ice season."

He scoffed. "That troll only just got away. I would have had him otherwise."

She'd sighed and shaken her head, but he was starting to recognise it as an affectionate gesture. Emboldened, he pushed on.

"How are the twins?"

Her hand flew to her hair, in an oddly familiar motion, then settled behind her ear. He'd seen it before, he realised, the night she'd tried to jump him. He wondered vaguely what it meant.

"They're fine. Or at least, they should be."

"Did Ruff ever find a husband?"

She swallowed and shook her head, avoiding his gaze.

He had questions of his own he wouldn't answer. When she finally had the courage to ask "Who's

Drago" he pretended not to hear.

That night, as they ate fish and some berries she'd found, she asked the first question he was glad to hear.

"Is reading hard?"

He'd shrugged. "I guess if you don't know how. I can't really remember learning."

"Who taught you?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Gothi. Me and Snoutlout used to have classes on Freya's day, shut up in her hut."

She smiled. "You must have smelt like wormwood by the end of the day."

"Wormwood and thyme."

They were sitting opposite each other, Toothless lying in a crescent between them - him by his head, her by his tail. The dragon had warmed significantly to Astrid over the day when his Rider hadn't shut up, and had laughed freely and without bitterness for the first time in weeks.

"Could you teach me?"

His brow furrowed. "To read or write?"

She shrugged. "Why not both? You're not planning to take me home and you're not going to kill me, so you might as well do something with our time together."

Time together. The words bought a flash of her body against his, and he pushed it to the back of his mind. He planned on having plenty of time with Astrid, and keeping her happy seemed like the best way to guarantee it.

"It won't be easy," he said, "but I could try."

They'd spent the rest of that night tracing runes in the soft ground with sticks. Astrid had quit twice and snapped two different sticks, swearing off the written word for the rest of her days, before he had finished running her through the alphabet. Hiccup had persisted, writing even as she huffed in anger. She had finally returned when Toothless had pulled a sapling from the ground and scratched his own runes in the ground - whenever she tried to cross them, he'd growl and she eventually fell back down next to Hiccup, took up her broken stick and sullenly copied her own runes beneath his.

Once they had tired, he had taken first watch and spent most of it trying to work out how she could be so far from the Astrid he had imagined for the past five years, yet he could feel so much more for her.

They swapped watches at midnight, and this time he didn't falter when he woke clinging to her side with her fingers gently stroking his forehead.

It was the third day, and the wounds on her cheek and arm were starting to scab when she asked about the tattoos.

"They hurt at the time, yes, but I'm glad to have them."

"Why?"

"Because they remind me who I am."

She had thought about that for a long time, walking in silence, before answering "You mustn't be too sure of who you are then, if you have to ink it into your skin."

They could see the lights of a village from where they made camp. "Camant," he told her, "it's called Camant. It's not a big place, but it's close to the sea and the harbour, so there's plenty of business and there's always passage to somewhere else."

"Does Rhea live there?" She'd made a pile of fire wood, and was about to strike a flint when Toothless lit it for her.

"On the outskirts, yes. I should probably warn you –"

She'd drawn an A in the dirt with a piece of kindling, and looked up at him for approval, and he'd forgotten whatever it was he needed to say.

9. Bitterness

Astrid hadn't realised she'd fallen asleep until she was woken by hot, sweaty breath and a piercing squawk.

Her eyes flew open, and she registered a dozen things at once - Hiccup clutched to her side, the blanket over both of them, Toothless tense where she rested against him. An enormous yellow eye, set in a face of blue scales, staring at her, inches from her face.

A Deadly Nadder.

Her training kicked in, screaming at her to run for a blind spot, but there wasn't one, not with the dragon this close. It tilted its head and sniffed at her, then reared back and skwarked again, louder this time. To her left, she heard Toothless begin to snarl. Hiccup shifted against her side, not quite awake.

Training. Nadders. Blind spot - no. Agility - not this time. Distraction...

She dusted the ground around her, keeping her head up and eyes locked on the Nadder. One of the sticks they'd used the night before to scratch runes in the soil rested near her hand, and she grasped it. Not the ideal distraction, but it was something.

Astrid raised the stick, slowly, then hurled it off into the distance.

The second the Nadder gave chase, she was up, shoving Hiccup into consciousness.

"Get up!"

Hiccup groaned, still working out which way was up as she shoved the blanket into Toothless' saddle bags and swung herself onto his back.

"Come on, he runs faster than us!"

Hiccup scrambled to his feet at the urgency in her voice. "What's happened?"

She looked out to where she'd tossed the stick, and - oh no, it was coming back, even faster—

"Get on!"

Hiccup followed her gaze, squinted - then burst out laughing.

The Nadder bounded back to them, running on the ground instead of flying, and she had to admit it was a comical sight, all thick jumpy legs and wagging body. Not worth her embarrassment, or her death.

"Let's go!"

Hiccup just laughed harder, doubling over. "It's - " He tried to speak through the laughter, but couldn't.

Frustrated, she tried to urge Toothless on, but he stayed where he was, and she got the distinct impression he was laughing at her too.

The Nadder was only a few feet away, charging back at them. Astrid braced herself for the stinging sparks of fire—

It stopped, two feet in front of her, and dropped the stick.

Toothless chuckled.

"Oh get off you old bird, leave him alone!"

The voice was sharp and accented, yelling in the common tongue. The Nadder heard it and, with one

final sniff at Astrid, turned and bounded off towards its source - a tall, older woman, with dark hair, making her way up the hill towards them.

Hiccup was still laughing by the time she'd reached them. The woman took one look at Astrid and raised an eyebrow.

"I don't think I've seen another soul on the back of that dragon."

Astrid bristled, not sure if she should feel proud or insulted. Hiccup finally stopped laughing and wiped a tear from his eye.

"Astrid, this is Rhea," he said, gesturing at the older woman. "Mother, meet my wife."

* * *

><p>The Nadder followed them all the way to a cottage on the edge of the village.<p>

She knew Toothless - the two had met many times before - and she respected him, but he quickly grew tired of her chattering and attempts to play. The one thing she kept repeating - danger, with a sharp glance at Astrid - he ignored, figuring it was something to do with her hostile nature and strange smell.

"She still spends autumn here then?" Hiccup asked, looking at the Nadder through the window. He held out a hand to her, palm first, and she folded forward into it, affectionately nuzzling.

"Of course," Rhea replied, pushing a plate full of bread and cheese into his free hand. "She hasn't found a rider, and she knows she can steal chicken off my plate. Which you should do also of course - you've gotten skinnier."

Astrid raised an eyebrow. He shrugged at her and mouthed the word Mother.

"So she still doesn't have a name?"

"Why would I name her if I'll never ride her? She'll keep coming back if I do."

"Like she doesn't already."

He stole a glance at Astrid, who was sitting awkwardly where Rhea had placed her at the kitchen table. The kitchen was open, sharing its fire with the forge, and the Nadder had come around to hang just beyond the threshold. Astrid was shifting in her place, glancing around.

She was nervous, he realised. Probably angry too, for the wife jab earlier, but definitely nervous. She kept glancing towards the Nadder, which glared back. She might have gotten used to Toothless out of necessity, but she still wasn't used to dragons.

"So," said Rhea, returning into the kitchen and shoving him, "are you going to feed her, or make her sit and stare?"

He wasn't sure if she was talking about Astrid or the Nadder. For safety's sake, he went with his 'wife', sitting down beside her and offering the plate.

"I'm not hungry," she muttered, looking away.

"Yes you are," said Rhea loudly, pulling some salted beef and a turbot from the larder. "Eat, it's good."

She threw the beef onto their plate and slipped into the forge where Toothless waited. She waved the fish in front of him. "Now you hold still you big lizard, okay?"

Toothless was more than happy to oblige - he knew he'd only get the fish if he behaved. Rhea ran a hand over his flank and inspected the damaged rig.

"How'd you mess it up this bad?"

Hiccup swallowed a mouthful of bread to answer. "We were attacked."

"Good. I won't have to skin you for what's up with her face then. Honestly inflicted injuries... and why don't you carry spare cord? You carry a map the size of a table but not two spare lengths to patch this up enough to fly. How long did you say you've walked?"

"Three days," said Astrid, finally joining the conversation. The more Rhea nagged Hiccup, the more Astrid liked her.

"Three days! Christ on horseback, that's no way to be. Tethered to the ground like that - bah." She disconnected the rig and gave Toothless the turbot - he snapped it up greedily, licking his lips.

Hiccup could feel Astrid relaxing slightly next to him, but she was still beyond tense. Rhea would grill him about it for hours if he didn't do something, especially considering the trip into Camant he had to make. He smeared a piece of bread with the soft white cheese and pressed it into her hand. She frowned.

"I can feed myself," she whispered, careful that Rhea didn't hear this time.

"Prove it," he muttered back, putting a piece of bread into his own mouth. She scowled and ate, still scowling as she swallowed. In fact, she scowled as she cut herself another slice of bread and layered on the cheese, wolfing it down with a reluctant scowl.

"Still angry?" he asked after her third slice, all with a scowl.

"I didn't expect it to be so good," she snapped back, before stuffing her face again.

Rhea returned from the forge, metal pieces in hand. "You can fix it yourself boy, since you broke it. Shouldn't be too hard. And you," she said, pointing at Astrid, who automatically stiffened, "can keep eating while I take a look at that cut and those burns."

Hiccup stood and sighed, taking the pieces from Rhea and stepping out into the forge. Toothless lit the coals, and the Nadder looked on as he stoked the flames, working the bellows and feeling the heat prickle his skin.

He wondered if the Nadder had recognised Astrid.

He set the ends of the broken rig into the glowing coals, resetting sensitive hooks and calibrations and trying to hear what was transpiring between his adopted mother and reluctant wife. Wife. He still wasn't sure why he'd introduced her as that. He was expecting a good interrogation about that soon, although Rhea had the tact not to do it in front of Astrid.

Fixing the tail was hard work, harder than he'd expected - the iron components were starting to rust and he figured he might as well replace them while he had the forget rather than make the trip back in two weeks. After two hours, he heard movement in the kitchen, the pushing back of chairs and the clearing of plates, and before long Rhea had appeared in the forge, tying on her own apron.

They worked in silence, him beating and resetting iron and steel as she melted down gold in clay pots to work thinly onto a knife handle. It was almost an hour before she broke the silence.

"So, a wife eh?"

He shrugged. "She's as much my wife as you're my mother."

"So not at all then."

"Essentially."

She reached past him with a pair of pliers to pull one of her pots from the flames. The gold was still thick and lumpy, so she returned it.

"And is she the Astrid you moan about in your sleep?"

He froze, mortified. Rhea laughed. "You can't sleep in my forge with these paper thin walls and not expect me to notice. Old people don't sleep as well as the young. Although your dreams with her seem to be a mix of good and bad, so—"

"They're bad when something happens to her."

Rhea raised an eyebrow. "Something other than you, that is." She adjusted one of the eyes on the rig while she waited for the gold to liquidise. "How'd she get to being called your wife?"

"By accident."

Rhea raised an eyebrow. "So you've got yourself your dream woman as a not wife by accident. Sounds like you've been busy."

"Where is she now?"

Rhea jerked a head at her own room. "Asleep, or I hope to the Almighty she is. Said she hasn't slept proper in a bed for almost a week. And speaking of beds..."

Hiccup threw up his hands. "I'd like a new conversation please."

Rhea smirked. "So you haven't - good. She seems nervous. Vicious, but nervous."

Hiccup wound some cord through a tension wire and thought that was the perfect way to describe Astrid's approach to the new world she'd found herself living in.

They dropped back into silence as they worked, and were left with Toothless' purrs and the occasional squawk of the Nadder. Astrid stayed in the room, although if she was sleeping or merely hiding, he couldn't tell.

The sun was slipping beneath the horizon when he reattached the tail rig and tested it proudly. Toothless seemed happy enough, although the lazy beast had decided that beside Rhea's hearth with a belly full of fish was where he wanted to be. After a quick dive into the sea to gather his meal, the dragon returned to the forge and settled in.

Hiccup rolled his eyes at the contented dragon. Looked like he'd be walking into town.

Rhea knew what he was going to say before he opened his mouth.

"No."

He scowled. "I have to."

Rhea jerked her head at the bedroom door. It was still closed. "And does your wife know what you 'have to' do? What sleeping dogs you won't let lie?"

"She's not my wife, and the dogs aren't sleeping," he said, pulling on his flight helmet. He wouldn't want to be recognised, not where he was headed.

"Hiccup, please. See her another time. I'll have you back whenever you need be. I like the girl, whatever mess you've put her through to get her here. You can stay through winter if you like. Just... go in there, and sleep." She pointed at the closed door. "Sleep, and let the dogs do so too."

He could feel the cotton sheets against his skin, and the softness of Astrid's hair as she held him through fitful dreams. But he could also smell the roasted flesh of a thousand dead men and dragons, and one dead woman, and knew he was only part of something far greater.

"I can't," he said, securing the helmet and grabbing his sword from Toothless' saddlebags. As he slipped out the door, the light caught the slats of the closed bedroom door. He could see her silhouette, and knew she'd heard everything.

* * *

><p>Snoutlout was in a foul mood by mid afternoon.<p>

They had been stuck in the Meade Hall for hours as the Council debated every pointless detail of Astrid's message. They'd drunk and drunk and only gotten more impassioned and less articulate.

The general consensus was that the Dragon Rider could take his peace negotiations and shove them straight up his ass. Snoutlout, unusually, had argued against the consensus, and his own father.

He wanted to meet the Rider, and kill him with his own hands.

He couldn't shake the image of Astrid being dragged off to the Kill Ring. He, like all of Berk, had hardly recognised her. In his mind, her braid was longer than ever and her skin was soft and smelt of wool. Whatever had landed that morning wasn't the Astrid he thought he knew.

It was with a mind clouded with ale and an angry glare that he set off towards the Kill Ring. They'd called an hour's recess, to "calm their minds and fuck their women", according to his father. He'd scowled at that. He'd never liked his father's crass words at home, and hated them more when he was drunk and yelled obscenities in what should have been a respectable forum.

His father, he supposed, was to blame for most of his woes. He had been born a bastard, had grown up bitter and raised a bitter son, with the sole hope of one day stealing the chieftdom if he could not inherit. As a child, Snoutlout had wanted nothing more than to throw his cousin aside and claim the throne is only to impress his father. As an adult, he wanted nothing more than to disappoint the man. And now he was heir, and had no idea what he wanted anymore.

His father had been the one to champion the sacrifice. His father had been the one to proclaim Astrid the only option, and had crowed from the rooftops when she seemed destined to end their destruction. His father had tried to beat him two days after she was taken, when the Dragon Rider returned and destroyed the armoury. That had been the first time he'd hit back.

He'd lost too much to his father. If he could only keep one thing, it would be his dignity.

Tuff was on guard duty when he reached the Ring, sitting on an empty crate and talking animatedly. As he got closer, he could see Astrid seated on an upturned bucket, listening intently.

"And I mean, huge. Like, twice the size of a man, and I'm talking a big man here. And they were all trying to eat the flesh right off my bones, then eat the bones off whatever's inside them, and _"

"Tuffnut, go to the hall."

Tuff looked up at him, confused. "But, I haven't finished describing my dream yet."

"Go to the hall Tuff."

Tuff stood, muttering under his breath. "Didn't even get to the good bit."

Snoutlout looked down at her through the metal mesh, and she looked forward, refusing to look at him.

"What the fuck has he done to you?"

She kept staring at the wall. "Nothing you didn't know he would when you left me up there."

Snoutlout sighed and sat down on Tuff's abandoned crate. "I didn't tie you to the posts."

"Didn't cut me loose either." Once he was down at her level, she looked at him, and he was hit by how sharp her eyes still were. "What do you want?"

"Could I kill him?"

She shook her head. "I've had six months, and I haven't."

"You've had six months for him to beat you and cut you and fuck you until you did what he said. Could I kill him?"

She almost knocked the cage door off its hinges, wrapping her fingers around the metal links and twisting furiously.

"Who the fuck do you think I am?"

He didn't move. "Could I kill him?"

"You just want to know if he's fucked me, don't you?"

It scared him that after all this time and all the change, she could still see right through him.

She shook her head, disbelieving. "You put me out as a sacrifice, a neatly wrapped gift, but deep down you still want to save me, don't you? You still want the pure little virgin you left up on the cliffs, so you can ruin me yourself." She grinned darkly. "Tuff told me about your betrothal. Congratulations. Fucked her yet?"

He laughed, bitterly. "He didn't tell you it was Hildegard then."

"Hildegard?" Astrid's face scrunched in disgust. "She's a child!"

"Yes. But in five years she won't be. And I'll marry her then."

"So you'll be stuck pretending you can get a woman with your charming personality until then?"

"No need. Already got one. Heir's mistress."

Astrid laughed at that. "Poor thing."

"It's Ruff."

That shut her up.

Her mouth opened and closed before she managed to get a single word out. "No."

"Turns out fucking an entire boatload of Southerners didn't exactly widen her prospects. Widened other things though."

She shoved at the mesh again, and this time he really thought it would bend. "If you hurt her--"

"She came to me. Smarter than her brother, that's for sure. Knew if she was going to be a slut she might as well be the chief's slut."

Astrid kicked at the door, snapping the bottom hinges. "You want to know if he's fucked me? Do you?"

He reached forward to hold the door shut and keep her from escaping. He yelled for help, cursing his own foolishness and the side of him that would always be as bitter as his father. He couldn't stand to lose anything, and here was what he'd lost, ready to escape again.

Holding the cage shut, his face was inches from hers. Her breath was hot and sharp as she spat at him.

"He never touched me."

Snoutlout had to focus to keep his grip on the cage door. His whole body seemed lighter at the prospect of possibility. He could hear others coming, to see what had happened, and breathed a sigh of relief.

She leaned in closer and looked him in the eye before the others drew near enough to hear.

"Not until I touched him first."

10. Drunk

Of all the things she had expected when Hiccup had mentioned his 'mother', getting drunk with her was not one of them.

And yet there she was, taking another hit of whiskey, as the older woman guffawed at the idea of Hiccup setting his own house alight at age four.

Astrid decided she really liked whiskey, and was warming to Rhea even more.

Once she'd admitted defeat and slunk out of the bedroom, after two hours sleep and many more hours loitering, Rhea had swept her up and put her to work chopping vegetables. When she saw the mess Astrid made of those, she'd sent her out to chop firewood instead.

It had felt good to have an axe back in her hand, even if it was a tool rather than a weapon. She looked at the forge and remembered her old battleaxe, probably sitting forgotten with her old belongings on Berk. She wondered if she could extort Hiccup into making her a new one, then remembered the conversation she'd overheard, and decided she couldn't.

They'd been making progress, she thought as she brought the axe down again in frustration. He'd started opening up, talking, running her through runes - she'd started to see Toothless as a living being rather than dumb animal, and had even started sympathising with his reasons for running away. She'd started to think of a way to bring him back to Berk with her. They'd been

making whatever this was work.

And of course he had to go and ruin it with whatever these secrets were.

A woman. A woman was definitely involved. Of course, a woman was involved with Rhea, but unless she was fiercely protective of her false son, it was unlikely Rhea would object so vehemently to Hiccup seeing a casual acquaintance.

For some reason, thinking of Hiccup's clandestine trip to see another woman sent her axe splintering into the wood.

Rhea had seemed impressed with her work, but had been unable to resist the jibe. "Well the boy didn't lie if you're that frustrated."

She had pulled out the whiskey before the food, and offered Astrid a small metal tumbler. "To ease the pain of my stodgy cooking," she'd said, pouring each of them a measure, "and to welcome you into whatever kind of family this is."

Astrid had sipped the whiskey where Rhea knocked it back in a single draught.

"Is this a dragon friendly city?" she asked as Rhea refilled the glasses. Rhea snorted.

"Hardly friendly, although we don't slaughter them by the thousands. They leave us alone and we leave them be. Except that one of course," she said, jerking her thumb at the Nadder from earlier. It had disappeared during the day but returned once the sun had set. It roosted like a chicken, Astrid noticed, where Toothless curled like a cat. "That one's his fault, too. Showed up one autumn when he was here and now spends that whole season bothering me."

Though her words were harsh, there was affection in the tone. Astrid noticed her glass was empty and was quick to finish her own, so another measure could be drawn.

The stew had burned as they drank more and more, her words becoming louder and her muscles loosening. She liked Rhea, she decided as the woman pulled the boiling pot from the forge flames and swore in colourful terms Astrid hadn't even heard before. She liked her casual attitude and her fast words and the fact that she drank and swore and lived by herself with a forge and a pesky dragon.

She realised suddenly that so much of Rhea was what she imagined in an older Ruffnut, and her chest twisted.

Rhea noticed her face fall. "You look as if the gallows have come to meet you, girl."

Astrid blinked, and noticed the tears in her eyes. "Just... thinking of an old friend."

Rhea poured her another drink. "To old friends and new. And to drinking instead of eating, because that stew is irredeemable."

They tapped tumblers, and drank.

The moon was high by the time Rhea became hideously inappropriate.

"So nothing? I know you're his wife but you're not and it's by accident anyways, but nothing?"

Astrid nodded, too drunk to be uncomfortable. Rhea filled her glass for the thousandth time.

"You're getting cheated then, my love."

Astrid picked up her tumbler and frowned. "I don't think so. It could be so much worse."

Rhea shrugged. "It could be. But you're young and fresh and it could be much better too. Go out and enjoy it, before your tits start to sag like mine."

Something in those words seemed wrong to Astrid's foggy mind, and she sought it out.

"Enjoy it?"

Rhea nodded. "Yes, while he's still as young and fresh and desperate to please. You've got years for having children, you've got years for raising them, and you've got years for wrapping you thighs around his head until he has you screaming and begging for mercy and more."

Even Astrid's drunk mind lurched at the graphic image. She was still struggling with the core concept.

"What do you mean, enjoy it?"

Rhea raised an eyebrow. "You do know how it works between man and woman?"

Astrid bristled. "Of course I do." She didn't mention her unsuccessful attempt at first hand experience.

"Well, what needs explaining?"

"Doesn't... don't..." Astrid's drunk mind was searching for words she didn't have. "Aren't you meant to hate it?"

Rhea looked horrified. "What do they teach you girls on Berk?"

"That... you endure it. You submit until they're happy, then you can go about your business until they want you again."

Rhea shook her head and slapped Astrid's thigh. "Never, ever, take advice from sour old women Astrid. Find the drunk, honest ones, because they'll tell you - if he wants pleasure, he has to give it first. First and foremost if you ask me. It's between two people, so what's the point if only one wants it? Lie down and endure - Christ! No wonder he hasn't taken you to bed if you're his not wife by accident who he dreams of and thinks that's the only way to consummate a marriage! He'd be scared shitless of hurting you."

Astrid couldn't help her curiosity. "Has he had other women?"

"Not that he's told me. Didn't want to give a definitive answer on you even."

"What about the woman in Camant?"

Rhea's face darkened. "Allayne," she spat, and lowered her eyes. "That's a bad business. That all is. But Christ can't stop him, so neither can I."

Astrid took another sip at her drink, slower this time, aware that the world was getting woozy.

"What's Christ? You keep mentioning it."

Rhea smiled. "Swearing by him, you might say."

"Is he a god?"

"He's the god, around here. Kind of like Thor, but if Thor were still Odin. And... a whole bunch of other things that are too complex for explaining." She was pouring another drink to demonstrate her inability to explain things, when Hiccup returned.

Four hours ago, she might have been cold and aloof towards him. Now, both women were too drunk to remember their hostility.

"There's the boy," Rhea proclaimed, swinging an arm around him. His face broke into a smile, and it was only in the contrast that Astrid noticed how stiff and humourless he had been.

"We're drinking," she explained needlessly.

"I can see that," he replied, sitting beside her. "Is there any left?"

"Not enough to get you as far as us, but enough to help you along the way." Rhea handed him the bottle and stepped back, unsteady on her feet. "And now I've gone and ruined it by standing. I'll have to put myself to bed and hate myself at dawn. You know where the mattress is?" Hiccup nodded, wordlessly. "Good. Sleep on it this time, not that scaly beast." She gave Astrid a jaunty if unstable wave and smiled broadly. "Thank you for getting an old woman drunk, and reminding her of the pleasures of youth."

Rhea disappeared into her own room and tugged the door shut, leaving the two alone with the bottle of whiskey.

"I don't think I need anymore," Astrid said when he offered to pour. He shrugged, and instead drank from the bottle. Her nose wrinkled in disgust.

"What?"

"Your mouth." she explained, still foggy in her reasoning. He raised a brow in confusion. "It's been all over the bottle now. What if I had wanted more?"

"You just said you didn't." He took another swig. She scowled again, and was frustrated by how much his eyes softened as she tried to look intimidating.

"Now if I want more I'll have to go past your mouth. It'd be like kissing you all over again."

"Not like you haven't done that before."

"You started it."

How drunk was she?

"And how was it?"

She hadn't expected him to ask, but wasn't afraid to give an answer.

"Not bad," she admitted. "The first time was horrible, but they got better. Probably because they got less... yeah."

He took that as an answer and opened a cupboard, unfolding a rolled mattress onto the forge floor. She slipped up beside him as he straightened, with no idea whether it was the whiskey or that black part of her mind speaking.

"I liked it when you did that tongue thing."

His jaw dropped, and she rose up on her toes to kiss it, smooth lips against rough stubble. When her toes lost their balance, she sunk to her real height, leaning into his neck and breathing hotly against his skin.

She could hear his breathing coming fast and heavy, before he broke away and grabbed the whiskey bottle. He took another drink, a long one, and collapsed onto the mattress.

She suddenly felt too hot and cold all at once and tried to run her fingers through her hair to calm herself, only for them to snag in her own braid. She pulled at the knotted hair, trying to untangle her hands, but ended up a mess, falling to the floor and somehow landing with her ass on the mattress.

Hiccup raised an eyebrow. "Graceful."

Her normal self would have told him to fuck off back to Allayne, whoever she was, but she wasn't her normal self. Instead, she was forgetting she braided her own hair and falling onto mattresses with people she should probably still be angry at.

She didn't notice him raising his hand until it was brushing at her ruined braids.

"Could I..."

He didn't finish the question. She had no idea what the question was meant to be.

"Can you what?"

"Could I braid your hair?"

The question came out as one word, with a squeak at the end, and she couldn't help laughing at how terrified he looked. Toothless grumbled and shot them a disapproving look, then settled down again with his ear flaps closed. Astrid laughed until his face fell, then kept laughing until it was lifted again, optimistically.

"Okay," she finally said. "Okay."

She found the ties, somehow, and was halfway through pulling the braid apart when her fingers snagged on a pin. Pulling it out, she realised she'd forgotten it was there.

"What's that?"

Hiccup peered over her shoulder. Somehow, her drunk mind managed to cover it.

"A pin. Ruff made it for me, before I left."

Not wanting any more questions, she grabbed his hands and set them in her hair.

"Untangle that for me, I'm too drunk."

"As m'lady commands," he said, gently pulling at strands until the whole thing unravelled around her shoulders. She knew the feel of her hair around her shoulders but she wasn't used to it - was more accustomed to having it bound. Vaguely, she remembered the tradition of men removing the bridal crown and braids at the end of a long wedding ceremony. Once they were removed, the couple could disappear behind a locked door and not be seen for a month.

Once her hair was fully untangled, he stopped for a second. She mistook his silence for helplessness.

"Do you actually know how to braid?"

Her voice broke his reverie, and he sat up on his knees, shuffling to be seated behind her. "Of course. We used to braid Tuff's hair and get him to break stuff so Ruff would get the blame."

When his fingers ran through her hair, she knew he wasn't lying. She tended to be rough with her own hair, pulling on tangles and breaking snags, but he was patient, working through knots and softly weaving the hair back together. It was relaxing to feel someone else caring for her hair, to have someone willing to do it, even if his gentle touch meant it was taking far longer than it should have.

She closed her eyes and hummed in satisfaction, and could practically see him smiling.

"Why did you throw me off?"

She didn't mean to ask the question - it slid through her lips unbidden. His hands froze in her hair.

"The other night," she elaborated, turning to face him. He was still holding the braid, hands crossed between them like an immovable barrier. "You can't say you weren't interested."

Perhaps it was how honest she'd been with him earlier about the kisses. Perhaps it was the whiskey, and the knowledge that she probably wouldn't remember what he said. Or maybe it was just the chance at honesty, finally.

"I wasn't just interested. I wanted you."

"But you don't want to take me home."

"No. Yes. Turn around."

She did as he said, and after a moment, he went back to twisting her hair. His voice was low when he spoke, deeper than usual, a hot black excitement twisted in her belly.

"I want you right now, but you're too drunk to know it. And I won't have you as a part of some bargain to send you back to a tribe who turned their back on you, even if you think it's what's best. I'm not an animal Astrid. I won't have you unless you actually want me too."

His fingertips brushed against the back of her neck, and she had to tear her mind from the memory of his fingers digging into her hips by reminding herself of them shoving her to the side.

"Then why did you even start?"

He held out a hand for the tie, and she passed it to him. Warmth flooded from where their fingers met, chasing up her to her elbow. He tied off the braid but didn't take his hands from her hair.

"Because I thought I was dreaming again. And I didn't know what to do when you were real."

She settled down onto the mattress, the sleepier part of her drunkenness taking control now that

honest had had its turn.

"Do you dream about me often?"

He brushed her bangs out of her eyes, and she allowed it, enjoying a final moment of tenderness before her inevitable, raging hangover in the morning.

"I don't have to now."

She smiled slightly and rolled onto her side - but not before sleepily biting her bottom lip and setting him on fire again.

11. Back In The Air

She was never drinking again.

If she'd thought the fire in her head was bad last time, it was a mere candle to what she felt when she woke on the mattress on the forge floor.

She was alone - Hiccup and Toothless were missing, and Rhea was nowhere to be seen.

There was a squawk to her left, and she realised she wasn't as alone as she'd thought.

She pulled her capelet around her shoulders to fight off the autumn chill and stood, staring at the Nadder. It must have been taught not to cross the threshold, as it shuffled around on its too big legs, flapping its wings but not passing under the roof.

It was a brilliant shade of blue, with bright gold spines and sharp yellow eyes. She'd always thought nadders were beautiful, in a dangerous sort of way, although their pelts fell apart in showers of scales whenever someone had the idea to skin one.

There were scars on its neck, she realised, as if someone had broken something against it, and another ring of scarring around one leg. What had Rhea said? It had followed Hiccup to her home. He'd know where it had come from, and why it was scared.

She stepped out over the threshold and the Nadder became frantic, hopping around at a safe distance. Astrid couldn't help feeling it had been taught not to injure humans, but it still wanted to hurt her.

She watched the sky for long minutes before she spotted them, soaring up and out from the edge of the cliff, a black streak against blue. It looked far less terrifying by the warm light of day than it had from the fiery torch light during all those raids. Everything looked less terrifying by the light of day.

Except her face, she discovered when she caught sight of it in a polished metal pan.

She fumbled around the kitchen for something to wash with, using the pan as a mirror. The cut was definitely going to scar, but she was warming to it - it made her seem battle worn and untouchable. No one would look at her now and think she'd make for a good sacrifice.

It was only once she'd finished washing and turned away to shoo the cooing Nadder when she noticed her hair. It was bound neatly, back and off her face save for the shorter bangs, but something was wrong.

She sighed and undid it, rapidly rebraiding it without care. The results were sloppy, but as she searched around the mattress for Ruff's pin to slide back into the knots, she knew it was best.

There was a thud outside the forge and clink of metal, and despite herself, she smiled.

"Astrid?"

"In here," she called, opening a wooden bread box and trying to find where Rhea kept that excellent cheese.

Hiccup was only just pulling off his helmet as he entered and she gaped at the sight of him. His entire demeanour had changed - his shoulders were loose, his eyes bright, posture tall and fluid and free. His hair was windblown, despite the helmet, and for the first time since she'd realised he wasn't dead, he looked truly alive.

"It's amazing out there!" He danced into the kitchen and pulled her into an unexpected embrace that she didn't have the time or heart to stop. After a moment he pulled away, smiling awkwardly, with an expression that said he probably shouldn't have done that.

"So we're back in the air?"

He nodded happily, quietly joyful that she'd used the word *_we_* and opened a small wax packet on the counter. Inside was the cheese. Astrid pounced on it, appreciatively, but he stopped when he noticed her hair, and coughed awkwardly.

"I... if you want to stay here for a while, that's ok. I might stay too, or I can leave, or... whichever you prefer."

She munched on a piece of bread and mulled it over. Getting away from Hiccup had been her goal for so long she wasn't sure what she'd do once he was gone. She liked Rhea enough to stay. It wasn't Berk, but it wasn't a cove with steep walls either.

Then she thought of how he tossed in his sleep and clung to her, and her heart thumped at the idea of him being alone again.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the Nadder sticking its snout through the window, trying to get a pat from Hiccup. It bumped her injured arm instead.

"Ah!" Hiccup didn't laugh until he knew she was okay, then he did so heartily. "What is with it, anyway? It's been bothering me all day, fussing around like it knows it shouldn't attack me but really really wants to."

Hiccup looked down at the bread as if unsure how to phrase his answer.

"She's from Berk," he said, flicking his nails together. "She probably recognises you."

Astrid huffed. "I don't recognise her. Why would she know me?"

"Take a closer look."

She did. It was the same scaly beast it had been all morning. A blue Nadder, which was one of the more pleasing shades, with scars on its neck and leg. She didn't see how she could—

Oh.

The memory came flooding back - falling walls, smashing wood, a heavier shield than she needed on her arm. Sticking her foot in Hiccup's face and wrenching his shield away with her axe to smash against the Nadder's snout.

"Oh," was all she could say, fighting back bitter memories. There was very little she was proud of in that moment.

"She's fine now," he reassured her, reaching out to scratch the Nadder's chin. "Lives free, comes back here in autumn. She doesn't have a rider but I'm not sure she'd want one." The Nadder purred against the window, then retreated to pester Toothless. Astrid leaned out the window to watch the frustrated Night Fury, and when she turned back, Hiccup had spread a thin layer of flour over the kitchen table.

"I... We didn't have time to practise your runes last night," he explained, pointing at the flour and using a finger to draw a few words. She smiled and stepped over to him.

"That's an A, yes?"

He nodded, and she wrote her own version of each letter underneath.

"Is that my name?"

He coughed. "Um, no. That's apple."

They'd written words and smoothed the flour back over to start again for almost an hour when he finally brought it up.

"I... I have to go away soon."

Astrid looked up, surprised. "To where? And why?"

And why can't you take me with you?

"I got some news last night. I'm not sure if I wanted to hear it or not but I have a chance I've been waiting years for and I can't waste it."

Allayne. Something to do with Allayne.

"How long will you be gone?"

He shrugged, trying to hide fear with a dismissive gesture and traced her name back into the flour. "Could be a day. Could be a week. Could be killed."

"What the Hel Hiccup?!" She grabbed his shoulders, dusting the flight suit with white. "Where are you going?"

When she didn't let go after two long minutes, he figured she wasn't letting go at all.

"To kill Drago, and end this war."

* * *

><p>They had fought all day about it. Rhea, once she'd awoken from her drunken stupor, had sided with Astrid, although her arguments were much more informed.<p>

"You can't trust her information Hiccup. She works for coin, so what's to stop her selling you for it?"

"She's never been wrong before. And she has more than coin to worry about. The child-"

"Of course she's never wrong, otherwise you wouldn't trust her and they couldn't buy your confidence through her!"

He'd scowled, and swallowed angrily. She had a point.

"This could be the last chance I get. I can't waste that."

Rhea had looked at him, and Astrid could have sworn her eyes darted back to her when she spoke. "Don't waste this."

He shook his head. "I'll leave at dawn."

He had spent the whole night in the forge, working, while Rhea swore and finished her knife handle at the kitchen table and Astrid swept the flour from the floor. When it came time to sleep, he was still working, so she took Rhea's offer and slept on the floor of the older woman's room, listening to the rhythmic beats of the anvil and trying to syncopate them with her heart.

She woke early, when the world was still dark blue, and found her hair tie had snapped. She'd shifted in her sleep, leaving her braids ruined, and she combed them out with her fingers before pulling on her skirt and heading for the forge.

She needn't have gone so far. He was asleep on the kitchen table, face pressed into the wood. She was loathe to wake him, but shook his shoulder gently anyway. He roused slowly, and when he lifted his head she could see flour stuck to his cheek.

"It's almost dawn."

She took a kettle and placed it in the smouldering coals of the forge for tea. It was still warm - he must have been using it less than an hour ago.

"What were you making?"

He didn't answer, and left her to notice the freshly forged axe sitting on a bench.

It was double headed, with curved edges ending in sharp points, and a sturdy handle made of mahogany. Chalk lines traced patterns he'd intended to shape into the metal but had lacked the time for. She picked it up, almost reverently, and tested the weight - perfectly balanced, the

grip matched to her smaller hands.

"You're so beautiful."

She stopped, back turned to him, uncertain if she was meant to hear.

"You really are. Sometimes I look at you and I can hardly breathe or think because you're there and you're Astrid and you could cut down the world and..."

He stood, chair scraping the stone floor, and stepped behind her.

"I don't want to leave with harsh words." He was behind her, hand reaching for her hair, when he stopped himself. She placed the axe gently back where it had been sitting, leaving her hands free.

"You can't braid it."

She could hear his head drop, even without seeing it. "You can't braid anything. That was a plait yesterday." She paused to hear the creak of leather as he lifted his hand again, hopeful.

"Can I plait it then?"

She turned, and looked up at him. One of his hands held on to a few strands of hair from the back of her head. "Only if you tell me who Drago is, and why you want to kill him."

His eyes darkened, and for the first time in her life, Hiccup looked fierce and furious.

"He killed my mother."

12. Valka

She was marched before the Council as soon as it reconvened.

She had been under constant guard since her 'escape attempt', as it had been dubbed. Luckily for her, the constant guard was Tuffnut, being punished for his lax attitude with extra duties. Although whoever had thought that was a good idea obviously hadn't ever met Tuff.

"You look like my sister when she looked like a boy."

"I was about to say the same thing to you."

He didn't understand the joke, and he didn't respond to it.

"So does he have any mauling? Like, serious dragon burns all over his body?"

She stiffened at the question, and didn't answer. Tuff kept asking anyway.

"Wait, do you have some mauling? Hey - that's a weird word when you say it too much. Mauling. Mauling mauling mauling. Woah, wait - you do!"

He reached forward, forgetting his place as a guard, and pulled her hair to one side. She was about to pull away and punch him when she realised the damage was already done. Sure enough, her neck was bruised and red behind her ear.

"Well that's disappointing," he said, letting her hair fall back. "That's not even impressive - looks like a human did it. Hey, did I tell you about the rest of my dream last night? Or did I only get up to the flesh sucking?"

Astrid rolled her eyes and thanked whichever god had decided to make Tuff stupid.

Snoutlout was nursing a bruised jaw and a sour mood when he came through to fetch them.

"Bring her in," he said, scowling before sulking back into the Meade Hall.

The hall seemed darker than she remembered it. Bright tapestries which had once hung the walls were slowly decaying and becoming grey with soot from the hearth, and once the door was shut behind her, there was no natural light at all.

Like Ruff, she'd once been terrified of the council. Over time she had come to respect it, but

once Hiccup had disappeared and the Jorgensons had began their stranglehold over it, she had come to be fearful of the council once more.

Spitelout leered at her before letting out a laugh. "He's made short work of you."

She held her tongue, knowing the stream of obscenities she wanted to speak would be a waste.

Spitelout continued on, unrepentant. "You show up on the back of a foul beast, refuse the help of your own people and speak on behalf of a murderer, then of all things you try to kill the heir of Berk?"

She started, then looked to Snoutlout. He scowled back. In the darkness at the back of the hall, she could just make out Ruffnut, pretending to clean a table.

"There's no denying what you've done, demon-wife."

She couldn't help herself. "I am not a demon wife. Call me a demon myself, but do not define me by what you tied me to."

Spitelout scoffed. "She can hardly talk past his cock in her mouth."

The Council guffawed, and she realised how drunk they were.

This was not ideal. This was not even okay - she needed the calm, rational leaders she'd respected as a girl, not the piss-soaked fools that laughed at the idea of her submission.

One face sat stony in his chair. He didn't laugh, and she knew he wasn't drunk - Gobber had had her help hide all the ale in the village after Hiccup's disappearance, just to avoid a repeat of what had happened after Valka's death. If there was a single word to describe Stoick the Vast, it was sober.

"It isn't just peace with dragons that he wants," she called, her voice filling the room but only speaking to a select few. "It's peace in all forms. He fights a greater enemy than you could ever conceive of, and without him, you'll be bowing down to a tyrant who murders children and their mothers within a year."

"Dragons already kill children and their mothers, girl," one of the elders sneered. "If you spent less time on your back you might have noticed what we faced during the raids. If there's a tyrant who will destroy us, it's the man who keeps you in his bed."

She lifted her chin, defiant and almost proud. "I didn't go willingly to him. I was given in desperation. How can you be willing to sacrifice your own daughters before you are willing to speak of peace?"

She refused to answer any more questions, and after five minutes of probing and silence, was sent back to her cell. In that whole time, her eyes fixed on Stoick, and even as she was dragged away, she held her accusing gaze.

* * *

><p>They had stood by the forge fire, far past daybreak, as he told her. He had swung from mood to mood, stopped for long, silent minutes, and tears had occasionally leaked through his words, but he told her everything this time.<p>

"She wasn't dead. That's the start of it. Twenty years ago she was carried away and everyone thought she was eaten, but she wasn't. Because they aren't like that."

Toothless had slipped his head under his rider's hand, resting it there, watching as he spoke.

"When... when I left, it didn't take long to find the nest. It was to the west, deep past Helheim's gate, but we found it. Toothless got called into it and he couldn't resist. They were stealing our food to feed a Queen, this giant, ancient dragon that could control them and would kill them if they resisted. That's why they attacked Berk, that's the only reason they ever attacked Berk - to protect themselves, and their own. Their children were born in the mountain, and were controlled as soon as they hatched and... I couldn't stop it. It was this... giant in a chain of nature that I couldn't exist in. So we flew away, and left it be."

He'd stopped, trying to find the words. She laced her fingers in his and squeezed, and they came to him.

"I'd been alone for three years by the time she found us. We were going north, trying to map the ice countries, but they kept changing, these new, huge islands of ice showing up everywhere. She was the first other dragon rider I met. She closed in on us one day, thought... thought I'd trapped Toothless and was trying to kill him. She nearly killed me for it, but -"

He traced the scar along his chin with the hand holding hers.

"She recognised me. After all those years, she knew that I'd taken after her. And... everything was perfect. I had a mother who loved me and who understood, and who had the trust of a Bewilderbeast, and—"

"Bewilderbeast?"

"It's the alpha species. There aren't many left, especially now, but if that queen was like a chief, then the alpha is a god. It can rule all dragons, with good or bad intention, and it owns the sky."

"And Valka tamed one?"

He shook his head. "You can't tame a dragon. You can only earn its trust. And she had its."

"What was she like?"

He smiled slightly at the memory. "Like me. She moved like a dragon and could burn through you with one look and spoke like she hadn't used words in years. She... she could walk between the wings of two dragons, and never look down."

He bit into his lip and shifted his grip on her hand, but didn't let go.

"I took her back to the nest, and the Bewilderbeast ripped the mountain open and killed the queen. I thought... I thought Berk would be safe, that they could learn, but she wouldn't listen. Said she'd seen enough cruelty to know that man couldn't change. Stubborn like that. She went back to the north, and I followed, even if I didn't want to, but... killing the queen drew attention to us. Drago's army found the carcass, found the island covered in ice. And they followed us."

"Who is Drago?"

He sighed. "No one knows. He just appeared, with an army of dragons, and the armies of men bowed down to him. He can... they say he can control a dragon with the blink of an eye but... it's more like a yell, and he only really controls one."

Her mind ticked over, processing what he'd already said. "An alpha?"

He nodded, sombre. "He must have raised the alpha to follow him, and it commands dragons, and they command men. There aren't many alpha's left, so when... when they heard about Mom's, he sent a force up north. We held out for months, in the ice islands, before Drago came. Then his alpha smashed through the fortress and blew the place to bits."

He swallowed, and she realised he was holding back tears.

"It gutted the Bewilderbeast, in front of an army. It took control of all the dragons, and it was over."

His hand closed tight around her own, the other balling into a fist.

"Her dragons were slaughtered, even after they submitted to his control. He left them where they fell, and blood froze over and stained the island red. She -" he stopped to swallow a sob. "She wouldn't surrender, so he caved in her skull with her own staff."

She matched his grip as the tears streaked hotly down his face. After minutes of silence, she spoke.

"How did you get away?"

He laughed, bitterly. "We'd argued that morning. I thought we should call reinforcements, try and speak to the dragon friendly tribes, see if they would help us. She refused, and I... I left. Again. I only saw the aftermath."

He clenched his teeth, and she could hear years of fury in his words.

"I'm sick of running away, and seeing the aftermath. This time, I'm going to create it."

She realised she was afraid - not of him, but for him.

He looked down at Toothless, and saw his own rage mirrored in his eyes, and the rising sun in hers.

"Shit."

He looked out over the horizon, and saw it was true - the day had started as he spoke.

"I can't waste time," he said, picking the axe up from the bench and handing it to her. "This is yours. I hope I can finish it for you some day." She gripped the handle firmly, and had never felt anything that was so entirely hers.

He ran a hand through her loose hair and sighed, full of regret. "I'm sorry. For everything - for taking you from Berk and bringing you into this shithole world of blood and madmen and trying to make you into someone I thought you were. And I'm... I'm sorry I don't have time to braid your hair."

She half laughed, and pulled him into a tight embrace. The axe pressed against the back of his flight suit and he buried his face in her hair and neck and tried to pretend his heart wasn't breaking. He'd only just found her, and he'd been an idiot to make such a mess of their time, and now he was leaving without the time to tell her he loved her with enough force to snuff out the sun.

But she held him tight, and seemed to know.

"Plait," she finally said into his shoulder. "You can't braid to save your life."

He was going to laugh when she kissed him, rough and urgent and full of the promise of better times. She tried to pull away but he followed her, deepening the kiss and running his tongue against hers, trying to pull her soul from her body and keep it with him. She responded in kind, trying to take his without knowing she already had it.

Toothless finally nudged him, when he was almost ready to throw revenge away and not give a damn and just be with her for the rest of his days.

They broke apart, and even the tiny distance hurt.

"You can plait it when you get back," she said sternly, as if promising a child an hour of play at the end of chores. "And you," she said to Toothless with similar sternness, "you had better bring him back in one piece." The dragon huffed and did something close to a nod, as if to say _You act like I wouldn't._

Astrid mimicked the dragon's expression, and Hiccup laughed and loved her more than anything. Her, exactly as she was, with an axe in hand and a scar on her cheek and refusing to let him leave before he promised not to be hurt. He had climbed onto Toothless' back and was about to fly away when he figured what the Hel, he might as well say it.

"I love you."

She nodded, kiss swollen lips glinting in the new dawn.

"I know."

Toothless left no room for sentimentality as he shot from the ground, leaving Astrid to watch as they became a mote of dust on the horizon.

13. Waiting

It was the endless, incessant waiting that broke her.

After two weeks, she'd chewed hair nails to their beds and was ready to kill something. She'd spent hours watching Rhea smith necklaces and brooches and even a pair of gold wedding bands, but couldn't say what she'd actually seen, her mind flying so far from where she was.

She focussed on her axe training, getting to know the swing and feel of her new weapon and trying not to think of the hands that had forged it. She earned her keep bringing firewood home from her long training sessions of killing trees, and soon Rhea had to sell it, there was so much.

The Nadder hovered around the house, shrieking and running away whenever she handled her axe. Otherwise, they reached an easy peace when one afternoon Astrid sat on the cliff, watching the horizon for a speck of black, and the Nadder decided to sit with her.

"Easy for you," she'd muttered as they stared out at sea. "You can fly."

She steered clear of Camant, although plenty of people saw her at the forge. When they asked after her, Rhea railed about her useless son leaving his new bride behind, and Astrid silently agreed with almost half her raving. Although she'd learned not to drink with the older woman ever again.

It was two weeks to the day since he'd left that she spotted the first ships.

They travelled slowly over the ocean, barely growing closer over the first few days. She could only see them from the very tops of the cliff, an hours walk from Rhea's forge, so she left every morning (followed by the Nadder) to watch and take note.

Armies were what Hiccup was worried about. And an army could arrive by sea.

Eventually, she could take it no longer.

"He should be back."

Rhea looked up from where she was chopping vegetables. "Aye, and if he could be, he would be. Should doesn't come into it I'm afraid."

The morning had been clear, and she'd spent it on the cliffs in the silent company of the Nadder, but by midday a bank of clouds had rolled in from the sea and blocked out the sun, and she'd returned to the forge with a heavy head full of questions.

"Who's Allayne?"

The rhythmic thunk of Rhea's knife stopped abruptly. "Who told you that name?"

"You did, just after you told me to take advantage of youth before my tits started to sag."

Rhea scowled at a bottle, knowing full well she'd be back to it by nightfall. "Trust whiskey to loosen my tongue."

"Hiccup trusted her, didn't he?"

"He did, and look where that got him," she spat, resuming her chopping. "Two weeks late with his bride behind."

The constant references to her as Hiccup's bride and wife that had so frustrated her two weeks ago now felt comforting.

"Who is she though?"

"A whore." Rhea swept the vegetables from a board into a pot and hauled it to the forge flames. "A good one, but a whore none the less."

"From Camant?"

"Not originally, but now. She's... popular, with soldiers. Hiccup figured a few years ago he could track the army's movement by where the soldiers stopped long enough to find a brothel, so he pays her well for information."

Information, Astrid repeated to herself. Information.

Though it was hard to see Hiccup surviving long in a room with a naked she-witch and a purse full of coin. He'd hardly been able to control himself when she was fully dressed and offering. Although the black part of her brain liked to think that was more to do with his desire for her than carnal pleasure alone.

The black part of her mind had become very vocal of late.

"Do you think she could have sold him out?"

"I think if she hasn't now, it's only a matter of time. He never listens to me though."

"Don't worry - he doesn't see you as a parent unless he doesn't listen to you."

"Does he listen to you?"

She faltered, and found a neutral answer. "I wouldn't want to be a parent to him."

Rhea didn't let up. "What do you want to be to him then?"

She didn't get an answer, as a shriek filled the air and a sharp black body appeared over the edge of the cliff.

Astrid scrambled to her feet, rushing out through the forge to meet him, but knew at once that something was wrong. Toothless landed on the edge of the cliffs, then collapsed, not bothering to fly or even bound closer. She broke into a run, boots digging into the ground, refusing to believe her suspicions until she was next to the dragon himself.

Toothless was injured, and alone.

The cuts were deep, along and across lines of muscle, and hard to spot at first as dark red blood clotted over the deep black scales. His saddle was ripped and torn, although whether it was deliberate or from a rough landing, she couldn't tell. The saddlebags had been stripped, and although his tail rig was mostly intact, he'd damaged it by flying alone.

His eyes were closed when she first approached, and opened weakly at the sound of her. He looked broken, and lost, and she didn't know what made her hold out an open palm. She approached slowly, letting him close the gap. His pupils dilated, and he did.

"What happened?"

The look of defeat in his eyes was heartbreaking.

Rhea finally reached the top of the cliffs and gasped at the sight of the dragon. Astrid still knelt beside him, holding his gaze, one hand pressed against his snout. Her eyes narrowed at the sound of Rhea's approach.

"Can you clean his wounds?"

Rhea nodded and knelt down, gently holding out a hand to Toothless. He looked back to Astrid, reluctant to let her go. The blonde warrior shook her head and stepped back.

"I'll be back. I just need to know what happened."

She turned and ran back down the hill, stopping only to retrieve her axe.

She'd never seen Camant up close, but the town was so vastly different to Berk she could be convinced she was in another world. The buildings were tall and bunched together, second stories jutting out over first and narrow streets paved with stones and mud. It had taken her ten minutes to find the town square in the labyrinth of streets, and from there, information was forthcoming.

She shoved her axe into the throat of the first man who passed.

"Where's Allayne?"

She had no time for pleasantries, no time for polite and wasted words.

"Wh...who?" he said, terrified.

"Allayne, the whore. Where does she live?"

"I don't know what you're -"

"Don't lie to me!" She pushed the blade a touch closer to his skin. He caved and pointed east.

"In the brothel above the bakers! You can smell the bread through their windows!"

She lowered the axe and smiled politely. "Thank you."

She found the bakery by smell alone and looked up - sure enough, there was a second story. She entered the shop axe first, and wasn't questioned on her way up through the kitchen and up the stairs.

She was questioned, however, by a haughty woman guarding the door at the end of the stairs.

"What do you think you're doing?"

She held the axe up as an answer. The woman remained indignant.

"You can't just storm in here with a weapon and -"

"It's an axe - I can break the fucking door down if I want to. Take me to Allayne and I won't."

The woman bristled and spat at her feet. "Where'd they find a savage whore like you?"

She heaved the axed into the door latch and pushed past, taking the door with her.

"Bring me Allayne or you'll see how savage I am."

She spun her axe in one hand and waited. The haughty woman eventually pushed past her and knocked at a door off to the left.

"Allayne? There's a wife here to see you."

The door opened, revealing exactly what Astrid had feared.

She was the same height as Astrid, but with soft, sweet features. Where Astrid's body was compact muscle and battlescars, she was slim and smooth with rounded hips and breasts and alluring long legs. Her hair was red and hung down her back in gentle curls.

She was also completely naked, without a care in world.

Allayne.

The whore took a moment to stare at Astrid, and she'd never felt so aware of her thick clothing and thicker thighs, her unkempt hair and the thin scar along her cheek.

Allayne breathed a sound of amazement. "None of mine have wives like this."

Astrid snarled and remembered her purpose. She gripped her axe and tried to keep her voice steady.

"What was the price to sell out Hiccup?"

Allayne started, and flicked her gaze to the haughty woman. "You're his?" She looked her up and down again. "No wonder he needed something sweeter. Come on," she said, gesturing to her open door. "I'll tell you all the sordid details."

It took all her willpower not to sink her axe into that perfect pale skin.

The second the door was closed and the haughty woman cut out, though, Allayne dropped her act.

"Has something happened to him?"

Astrid started. "Why would you care? You sold him out!"

Allayne pulled on a robe and hissed at her. "Quiet! Mamor thinks he's a customer - she'd beat me bloody if she knew what I did!" She pushed Astrid further into the room, and that was when Astrid realised they weren't alone.

The man was huge, twice her size and with biceps as thick as her waist. He could probably snap Allayne in two by accident. But for now, he was fast asleep and mostly clothed, curled in towards the wall.

"Don't wake him up," Allayne warned, pulling a pitcher of wine out from under the bed and handing

it to Astrid. "He didn't sleep last night." She pulled the shutters on the window closed before turning back to Astrid and raising an eyebrow.

"So, Hiccup got himself a wife."

Astrid ignored the wine and tried not to let her jealousy show. "Thanks to you I might as well be his widow. What did you sell him?"

Allayne frowned and took the wine back, before drinking straight from the jug. "The usual. Troop movements, which divisions have passed through, where they say they're going." She shot a look at the sleeping man.

Astrid ran a finger along the blade of her axe. "Specifics."

"What's he done?"

"That's none of your business. What did you tell him?"

Allayne shrugged. "Boats moving north. Troops being loaded. One ship with some higher ups going ahead, with something big that left bubbles on the surface of the sea." She drank again, and looked at Astrid, considering. "Never thought Hiccup had a woman."

Astrid scowled and shot a glance at the man on the bed. "Don't most of them?"

Allayne shrugged again, the edge of her robe falling to reveal a perfect shoulder. "Not that one. Anyway, I figured he was into boys."

That knocked her back. "Why in Hel would you think that?"

"Men who aren't interested in me tend not to be interested in women at all," she said, absently running a hand through red curls. "He hasn't tried anything for two years, so I just assumed." She took another moment to appraise Astrid's tangled braid and scarred face. "Guess he's just into something specific."

Astrid had had enough of her silent judgements and casual manner. She preferred direct answers. She stood, and pressed the blade of her axe against Allayne's soft throat.

"The main ship. Where was it going?"

She'd barely touched steel to flesh when hand clamped across her face and wrenched her back. The man, it seemed, was less asleep than she'd thought.

She kicked back into his shin and pulled herself to the left, breaking his grip and landing, catlike, axe first. The man snarled, reaching for a weapon and finding none. Instead, he grabbed the wine jug from Allayne's hand and held it up threateningly. Wine spilled down his arm, and he tried to keep a threatening face as it soaked into his shirt.

"Alla, are you okay?"

Allayne sighed and put a hand to her head. "Great, now he'll wake up for sure."

She fussed over to the bed, and the man lowered the jug apologetically. Despite his size, and the threatening tattoos across his chin Astrid could now see, he seemed more worried by Allayne's words than Astrid's axe, and more wounded too.

"Sorry - I didn't—"

"Never mind," Allayne snapped, reaching across the bed for something Astrid couldn't quite see. "He was going to wake anyway."

Astrid advanced forward, axe first. The man stepped back evenly, not scared but cautious. "The main ship."

Allayne's gaze flicked down to the axe, then back to the bed. "North east. But they've come back - the ships coming in, they're Drago's. Sent people ahead to bring the news." Her eyes flicked to the man, still standing between her and Astrid. "He likes to bring the armada to shore for a big victory from time to time. Put on a show. Usually an execution."

Astrid felt her heart drop through her body. "Execution?"

"Usually dissidents, freedom fighters. He lost a body a while back, some big leader, and ever since he likes everyone to see them die."

She stepped back and pulled her axe from Allayne's throat. "How long til they get to shore?"

"Two or three days."

Shit.

She turned on her heel and marched to the door, trying to keep herself in check, when the sting of betrayal and the question of blame hit her. She stormed back over and pressed the point of her axe into the man's chin.

"Are you one of them?"

He nodded, eyes flicking towards Allayne and the bed. Astrid leapt on the gesture, spinning her axe back towards the woman—

A child was curled up on the mattress, fast asleep. A boy, three or four years old, with the man's dark skin and hair but Allayne's slender build and slanted eyes. Allayne sat beside him, one hand on his arm, a knife in the other.

"Tell anyone of this, and I will kill you."

She thought of the woman at the door, Allayne's pointed nudity and quick dressing once inside, the man curled protectively over the boy on the bed when she entered. She stepped back, away from the knife, axe gripped tightly.

"If Hiccup is dead and you betrayed him, I'll kill your son myself."

She backed out evenly, only opening the door enough to leave, then bolted back down the stairs. Once she was out the door, she started to sprint. She could feel Allayne's eyes on her from the window above the bakery.

She ran through the town, trying to stick to the main road and find her way out as easily as possible. The tall, crowded houses seemed to lean over her, and she ran faster, trying to escape their looming gaze.

The breath was heaving from her body by the time she crested the hill and Rhea's forge was in sight. The storm had gathered closer, clouds dark and heavy, taking a pregnant pause before breaking open.

Toothless was curled on the floor of the forge, Rhea still washing his wounds. There were more than she'd thought.

"Can he fly?"

Rhea shook her head. "Even if he weren't injured, the tail rig's ruined. Hiccup'd have to fix it, and he's..."

"Fuck!"

She ran out over the grass to where Toothless had landed. Dark blood was seeping into the grass, stiff where the other stalks bent with the wind.

The ships were only getting closer.

She swore into the wind, swinging her axe in the wind and cursing every god before she noticed the Nadder.

She watched the little blonde warrior, head cocked, confused. She could smell fear and anger, but the woman was unharmed. If anything, she was healthy - especially compared to whatever had spilt blood on the grass. She sniffed at the blood, and realised it was the Night Fury's, with a touch of its rider's.

The gold haired woman was the Rider's mate, she was sure of it. They'd sat together waiting for him long enough. And now the woman was furious and crying and his blood was on the cliffs.

This woman had hurt her - all those years ago. She hadn't been the first, but she had been the last. The Rider had freed her with the memory of a shield shattering against her throat, and had later cleaned her scales and scratched her chin. She didn't want to Rider to be dead.

The mate looked at her, and she understood. She edged closer, head first, in little comic steps. The mate held out a hand, palm first, but unlike the Rider, she kept eye contact. She let the Nadder close the gap, but they stared at one another in understanding. She tried to step forwards, but it blocked her, as if she had missed the most important step in the ritual.

A name, she realised. The dragon still had no name.

She looked to the clouds, and the task at hand.

"Stormfly?"

The Nadder nodded and bent her knees. Astrid scrambled onto her shoulders, grasping her neck with one hand and axe with the other as they took to the sky and into the storm.

14. Trapped

Of all the reckless and foolhardy things Astrid had done in her life, riding an untamed Nadder into the eye of a storm to rescue her kidnapper from certain death had to take first place.

She clung to Stormfly's neck as she bucked and weaved, Astrid as unused to riding bareback as the dragon was to having a rider. She dug her thighs into the creature's flesh and that seemed to help stabilise them, until a fresh gale blew in their faces and threw them off course. She squinted through the wind and saw sleet in the distance, between them and the ships.

"Perfect."

As biting as the wind and weather was, sleet could be the perfect cover. Between grey skies and dark blue seas, the Nadder would be harder to spot and even harder to shoot down - she herself had tried to take down dragons in storms, and it was hard work.

She needed a plan.

She had nothing. She didn't even know for certain that Hiccup was on the ships, although a dull ache deep in her stomach was certain he was. Toothless couldn't have flown far with a damaged tail and bleeding wounds, and the ships were just far enough away. And they had been his target in the first place, to take down Drago. Where else could he be?

They hit the sleet like a hammer on a skin of ice, and woman and dragon shrieked at the sudden saturation. She clenched her teeth and focused.

One ship with some higher ups going ahead, with something big that left bubbles on the surface of the sea.

That must have been Hiccup's goal. And if it was his goal, it was likely his jail. She scanned the surface of the water but saw only rough tides and the belting of sleet against the ocean. Unless...

There, off to her left. A larger disturbance, roiling beneath the waves. Chains rose from the sea around it, tethering whatever breathed beneath the surface to a larger, steel clad boat. The boat itself was enormous, without sails. A hull dug deep into the water, and the deck was empty and obscured in the pouring rain. The whole ship seemed to inspire gravity, with wrenching rain circling it wildly in the storm.

"There!"

She had hardly heard the cry before Stormfly swooped and a net grazed the top of her head before falling into the ocean.

The Nadder swerved down, skimming the waves, Astrid clinging for dear life. The dragon seemed to hear each attack before it came, dodging net after net. After a moment, Astrid recognised a dull thump before each attack, and almost wondered where the Nadder had learnt to pre-empt the attacks - before remembering that she herself had probably taught the Nadder all she needed to know about the dangers of man.

"Come on girl," she urged, rubbing a hand against the beast's scales. The rain pelted down on

them, masking them, and for a moment there were no nets. "That's how to fly!"

The Nadder folded her wings in close, ducking down to the waves and drawing a wingtip into the water. Spray flew up on the left, blocking them from the attacking side. The larger ship loomed closer, and Astrid spied a gangplank off to one side.

"Over there girl," she said, urging her on with her thighs. The air seemed thicker around the ship, heavy and shifting. She barely had time to think before they were knocked to one side and dragged into a cyclone of dragons, circling the ship.

Astrid gripped Stormfly's horns desperately and tried to remember which way was up - the sky was thick with wings and talon, just like the attack that had driven them out of the cove. Stormfly tossed her head, unsettled, and Astrid placed a reassuring hand under her chin, trying to sooth her nerves as they were caught in the crowd.

Within dizzying moments, Astrid realised they were circling - solely around the main ship, and whatever was stirring the sea. Stormfly squawked, uncomfortable, and she stroked the dragon's scale, trying to calm her own nerves too.

"The ship, girl. Can you get me down there?"

Stormfly chattered and began to drop, lower in the cloud, until she was practically skimming the water. Astrid realised what she was planning and threw her legs to one side, ready to jump.

All at once, the wooden deck of the ship was blurring beneath her, and it was now or never. She jumped, slipping off Stormfly and plunging through the air. She tried to roll as she landed but the weight of her axe threw her out and she stumbled, desperately trying to find her bearings and work out where Stormfly way. She spotted the bring blue scales disappearing into the dark cloud of dragons, and hoped silently that the dragon would be okay.

It was only once she lost track of the streak of blue in the sky that Astrid realised how little of a plan she actually had.

Find Hiccup, and rescue him was all she had so far. She decided to add _Kill Drago _if she got a chance. How she would find him, or how they would get away was a mystery for another time. She dropped low, axe in hand, and surveyed the deck. Although empty, it was littered with heavy steel domes, each rigged with cables and cogs to be opened by a single man.

She also spotted the first sentry, just as he spotted her.

The man was tall, dressed in bearskin, and didn't have time to yell before she closed the distance between them and launched him overboard. The threat handled, she snuck between the domes looking for a way beneath deck. Hiccup would be there, he had to -

She ducked back behind a dome when she heard the voices. Men, loud and guffawing, crowded around one of the domes.

She caught her breath and thought for a moment, then extended the edge of her axe past their line of sight. In the smooth metal, she caught a reflection - six men, armed, surrounding the controls of one dome. Whatever was in there, it was important.

Looking to her left, she spotted an anomaly - one of the domes had been blasted open, the metal workings holding shut despite a hole in the dome large enough to fit three men. The edges of the hole were blackened and familiar, and she stepped towards it, hoping for some clue as to their purpose. Climbing up onto the cogs, her breath caught.

It was a prison. A tiny, metal prison with retractable walls. Chains hung loosely on the ground, along with broken leather straps and cord, touched with strips of blood. Whatever had escaped, it had been powerfully restrained. She ran a hand along the twisted, blackened metal, and realised she'd seen it a hundred times before.

Toothless.

He must have fought his way through restraints and shot his way out, limping home through the sky.

Her face broke into a snarl, and she ran a hand along the edge of her axe. It was sharp as a whisper.

The men by the dome never saw her coming. Between the sleet and carelessness, they had grouped

together around a small fire, placing bets on a Terrible Terror fight and arguing about which whore in Camant was best.

Two were dead before they even knew she was there.

The rest went quickly - an axe to the head, a blade across the throat, shoved overboard to whatever fate waited in the water. Only one landed a blow on her, a fast stab at her neck, but she twisted away and it grazed her shoulder instead, spilling her blood down her arm and his all over the deck. Within a minute, the dome was unguarded.

She ran to the controls, not knowing how long she had, and cranked the handle. The controls were heavy but she worked fast and efficient, until a thin gap opened between the metal slabs. She clambered up the side, sliding through the gap and dropping into the cage, only for her heart to stop as her feet hit the ground.

For a moment, she almost hoped she was wrong. The gap she'd left was somehow enough to let in the sleet and rain without adding a hint of light, and shadows filled her eyes. The shape sprawled on the prison floor was slumped and twisted, too small to be a dragon and yet too broken to be a man.

She approached slowly, pacing around to meet his face. His hair was matted with blood and he'd been stripped to his pants and nothing else. The tattoos coating his flesh took on a new quality in the shadows and seemed to dance, threateningly, as she drew close.

She knelt beside him, placed a hand under his chin and drew his gaze up to hers.

He was barely conscious - green eyes milky and pale, skin worn white - but his breathing quickened and brow slanted at the sight of her, somewhere between joy, disbelief and utter pain.

Hiccup.

Broken, beaten and battered, but undeniably him.

He whimpered, throat dry and parched, and lifted a hand to touch her. He could only lift it as high as his chest, but she grabbed it in both of hers and pressed it to her cheek.

"It's real," she whispered. "It's me."

Realising his hands were unbound, she surveyed the prison, almost hoping they'd beaten him enough to leave him unrestrained. But she'd seen it when she landed, and as desperate as she had been to block it from her mind, she knew it was still there.

Holding his hand to her cheek still, she gazed past his face to his left leg, and the steel trap closed around it.

It was a vicious thing, used to trap dragons and bears, with sharp teeth and a brutally fast mechanism. This one was buried in the flesh around his calf, and drenched in dried blood.

She pressed a fast kiss to his hand as she released it to inspect the trap. It was chained to the side of the dome, chained fast with a stronger steel than she could cut through. The trap itself was too thick to break with brute force - quietly, she hoped to inspect the mechanism and disengage it.

Once she was beside it though, she realised it was far worse than she'd thought.

It must have been there for days. The teeth had snapped closed and broken bone, but had then dug further and further into flesh until the blood clotted around serrated steel and the trap was as much a part of his body as the broken bones and useless foot below it. The exposed edges of muscle and bone had started to seep and turn black.

Her breath caught at the sight of it. She'd seen idiots stumble into these traps before, and were considered lucky to only lose a limb when released and tended to immediately. She couldn't remove this trap without pulling the flesh apart, and she couldn't remove Hiccup with the trap chaining him to his prison.

There was a yell on deck, and the sound and feel of running feet reverberated through the wooden deck. Hiccup started and twisted towards her, panic across his face. Not for himself, she realised, but for her. The fate she would face if captured was more horrific to him than what they'd already done. She scrambled up to him and took his face in both hands.

"Is Drago here? Can I kill him?"

Hiccup shook his head, eyes broken. She looked down at his leg again, and swallowed sharply.

"Do it."

His voice was thin and raspy, and it hurt her to hear it at all. He knew as well as she did what the only option was. She met his gaze, questioning, and he returned it, determined.

Unable to speak, she leaned forward and pressed her lips against his, flinching as he recoiled and cursing herself for not noticing the split in his lips and the broken teeth.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, rising to her feet and stepping down to the trap. It seemed to glare at her, wrapped tight around his leg and refusing to let go. She sized up the injury, wondering if he would ever walk again. The running feet grew louder.

It's the only option, she thought, steeling herself. She could hear his pathetic whimpering, begging her to just do it and have it be over.

She stepped back and swung her axe, slicing down to drive through skin and bone, and severing his leg below the knee.

He screamed, hoarse and sharp and wrenching, and the air filled with a sickening crack, but she couldn't stop to listen. She slung an arm under his, dragging him to the lip of the dome and climbing out before him. She had just turned to haul him out when a hand closed around her braid and yanked her back.

She fell from her place on the mechanism, sprawling to the ground and losing her axe in the fall, the hand still wrenching at her hair.

"I've got the bitch," yelled a man behind her, and a blinding sting exploded across her back. She felt rivulets of blood seep into her skin, and realised she'd been cut from shoulder to shoulder.

"Pretty little slut," called another, swaggering over and reaching around to pull at her shirt. The already ripped material shredded under his hands, leaving her back exposed and bleeding. "We should make quick while she's fresh."

The first man pulled at her hair again and she drove a foot back into his shin, breaking it with a satisfying crunch. He screamed in pain and grabbed her shoulder roughly, pushing her against the side of the dome. He tugged at her hair sharply, snapping it at the roots and pulling her mind away in pain as he pressed himself against her.

"You'll pay for that you little—"

Heat burst across her back, showering her bare skin in sparks and filling her ears with screams. She felt the grip on her body loosen and shoved back, diving for her axe. It took the acrid smell and a sudden change in weight for her to notice her own hair was on fire.

There was another hiss of flames, somewhere to her left, and she spun to spot it as she stifled the flames in her hair. The second would-be rapist howled as his flesh melted from its bones, screaming at the bright blue Nadder that had brought his death.

"Stormfly!"

The dragon rushed to her, wings unfurling. She was willing to save the woman, but wanted to do so as soon as possible. She nudged at Astrid's shoulder, grazing along tender bleeding flesh.

"Fuck! No, wait girl - in here."

She cranked the mechanism quickly, until there was a large enough gap for the dragon. Stormfly stuck her head in and cowered pitifully. Astrid climbed in over her, and grabbed Hiccup's shoulder.

"Come on!"

She didn't realise he was unconscious until she grabbed him. His eyes were closed and his breathing faint as fresh blood flowed from his leg and pain coursed through his veins.

"Hiccup! Don't you fucking dare!" Astrid yelled, hefting him over her shoulder and up onto Stormfly's back.

She didn't remember the flight back. She didn't remember falling from Stormfly's neck at the first hint of solid ground, Hiccup cradled against her body. She could vaguely remember tearing the rest of her shirt off and trying to tie a tourniquet around the wound, only to soak her hands in blood and realise the fabric was too little. The only thing she did remember was screaming at Stormfly's reluctance until the Nadder carefully sealed the wound with sizzling flames.

She had been one Hel of a sight, flying into the centre of Camant in her blood-soaked bindings and skirt, half dead lover in her arms, demeaning at axe point that they be taken to the nearest healer. The nearest healers were two days walk away, she was told, and in twenty minutes she was breaking down their door and demanding treatment.

As they laid him out on a pallet and applied poultices and bandages and prayer, she swore to whatever gods would listen that if they took him from her now, she would personally find Valhalla to kill them all.

15. Awake

It was almost a month before he woke properly.

In that time he floated in a world between Midguard and the next, where dragons flew free in the skies of Berk and a woman with short blonde hair washed his face and whispered words of love. He knew her name but couldn't say it, and over time she was replaced by other faces - a stern old man and woman, a girl with red hair and eyes like a fox, a tall woman with motherly touch. A black dragon guarded him through his dreams, and when pain chased him it would let Hiccup fly from the agony on its back.

He knew, from the dreams, that he was missing something, but when he woke he still screamed and sobbed and demanded to know what had happened to his leg. Toothless had sat beside him, not understanding the words the healer spoke but knowing what they meant. Hiccup himself had refused to listen, until Rhea had appeared and hit him over the head until he calmed down.

"It was the only option," she said, spooning soup into his mouth even though his hands and arms were fine. "She didn't have a choice."

The end of the wound was what bothered him most. His leg stopped abruptly, just below the knee, in a smooth mess of melted and blackened flesh. It has stopped bleeding well before he woke, and infection was unlikely with such a clean cut that was sealed so soon. _The only option, _Rhea had said. She didn't need to say it was the best one too.

The healers had fixed his leg to a sturdy wooden prosthetic which weighted heavy on his flesh. It was a week before he felt resigned enough to test it, and with Toothless' support had made three steps before stumbling and sprawling on the cold floor.

After that, he'd become determined. He spent every waking hour standing, pressing the tender flesh of his wound against the dense wood until his entire body ached and he wanted to wake from whatever terrible dream this was. All through it, Toothless sat by him, offering a steady head to rest his weight upon, and knowing more than anyone else could what he felt.

Allayne had come to see him, full of apologies and coin. He had turned away from her, unable to know if she had been as deceived as him. She had returned the next day, holding a sketchbook.

"She said to give you this."

It was empty inside, save for a quick sketch of some kind of metal and wood prosthesis that used a spring to distribute weight evenly and take pressure from the stump.

After two weeks he was cleared of infection by the healers and sent packing back to Rhea's home. Rhea had fussed and complained but had had her shed cleared and cleaned and a bed placed in it for him. He took the journey on Toothless' back, keeping slow to avoid jostling the wound and wanting to fly and soar and knowing neither of them could.

He knew from the moment he woke that his injury not only mirrored Toothless', but would bind both of them to the ground. Without his left foot, he couldn't control Toothless' tail fin, and without that, they would live their lives wingless.

He had waited another two days, limping around the forge, before asking after her.

"She's gone, boy. Leave her be."

He had practised walking with Toothless, and tinkered in the forge, and massaged his own injuries and his dragons. In every interaction, he could feel the creature's guilt, thick and heavy in the air, until one night they sat together on the cliffs by the sea and he broke and wept and cursed the gods while Toothless stayed by him. The dragon had carried the man back to his shed, and from then on, they both knew what it was to lose.

Eventually, he took the sketchbook and examined the design, before disappearing into the forge and emerging ten hours later with a new leg and a broader outlook on life. The new prosthetic was lighter, thinner, and bore his weight more naturally. Toothless had sniffed at it and nodded with approval, then walked him to the cliffs and watched the sky from the ground.

When he returned, Rhea was scowling. "Are you watching for ships?"

He shook his head. "Watching for her then."

Allayne called by the house again, and despite Rhea's glares, reported that Drago was regathering forced to move to the north west. She had expected him to be relieved, but instead his mood darkened.

His leg had ached that night, more than it had in the weeks since he'd woken, and again he saw the woman with short hair and clear eyes as she soothed his dreams and pressed soft lips to his brow, whispering that this too would pass. He had woken with a dry throat and stiff leg and had slipped from the shed to the kitchen, searching for water and some solution to everything he feared.

He heard the thump and flap of wings and assumed Toothless was chasing bats again. He barely dared to hope when there was a rustle of clothing and the sound of feet hitting the ground.

He only let himself believe she was real when she strode into the forge and stopped at the sight of him.

Everything about her was sharper. She held a folded parchment in one hand and her axe in the other, tossing her hair from her eyes with her head rather than fingers. She'd added thick furs to her arms to stave off the cold and her shirt was new and embroidered along the neck, and she now wore a thin spear of dragon tooth on a cord around her neck. Her scar had faded over the past six weeks into a neat seam across her cheek, and her hair hung short around her shoulders, windblown from flight. Her eyes glinted in the half lit night and her cheeks, even in the dark, were flush with colour, and for the first time since he'd woken, she was there.

She saw him, and dropped the axe.

He wasn't sure what happened next but the next thing he processed was being shoved against the pantry wall and her lips practically devouring him. It was messy, and painful, more teeth and jaw than lips, but her body pressed flush against him and into him and he dragged his hands through her hair as she sucked at his bottom lip. A tiny part of his brain noticed that as she'd surged at him, she had ripped off her necklace and thrown it to the ground.

She broke away, panting, to grip his shoulder and stare at him, as if making sure he was real - he took the sharp dig of her fingers on him as proof that she was.

Then she punched him in the gut.

He howled and doubled over in pain, slipping on his false foot and falling forward into her. In between disbelief and confusion, he managed to choke out a single word.

"What?"

"That," she said, poking him in the chest, "was for scaring me." Then she launched herself back into his arms and after what felt like hours of sliding lips and darting tongues and her fingers twisted in his tunic, he forgot what he was going to say.

16. Adjustments

Berk had gone nearly a month without a raid when a Monstrous Nightmare set the new catapult on the western cliffs alight.

The village had become cautiously optimistic, despite the raid only two days after Astrid was

taken. Little had been damaged, apart from the armoury and part of the bakery, and since then there had been relative peace. Perhaps, they had said, Astrid was simply a gift that took a little getting used to.

Gobber had watched the catapult go up in flames and sighed, turning back to his work.

When the raids had stopped being about food and livestock and had begun to fill with fire and destruction, he had taken to staying in the forge until the dragons and their Rider were out of sight. Not his sight of course - the edge of the bench was out of his sight by now - but when the warriors started cursing and bringing in damaged weapons. He wasn't afraid - merely tired. There had been challenge in wrestling a sheep from the jaws of a hungry dragon. Watching them duck and dive and destroy with strategy wasn't a fair fight, and frankly gave him the willies.

So when the western cliffs began to glow in the distance of his faded sight, he sighed and set about sharpening swords to replace the blunted ones he'd inevitably be given in an hour. He'd enjoyed the brief peace, although he couldn't reconcile it with the cause. He'd been ill, with a high fever, when Astrid had been tied to the cliffs - otherwise, he might well have cut her down himself.

It wasn't what civilised people did, he thought, cranking the grindstone. Sacrificing their own in the vague hope of driving off an enemy. Besides the barbarity of it, it just plain stupid - if the Rider liked what he received, what was to stop him attacking until they surrendered every chaste girl in the village to his harem?

More of Spitelout's madness, of course. He'd been nursing a swollen jaw the day after that first raid, and his son had had bloody knuckles. At least some good had come of that raid.

Gobber almost didn't hear it over the yells of angry warriors breaking down doors and streaming towards the western cliffs. The Nightmare had been joined by a Zippleback and two Gronkles, breaking the already burning structures into chunks of flaming wood. It was almost as if the people of Berk had been desperately waiting for an attack - the village square was empty within minutes, leaving Gobber alone with his grindstone, and a stronger sense of hearing since his sight had faded. It was with that that he managed to hear the thump off to his left and the folding of wings.

The Rider. Sliding off the back of a blue Nadder and sprinting into Gobber's own house.

For a moment, Gobber doubted his own eyes, knowing that they had failed him before. But there was the Nadder, shifting nervously from one foot to the other, keeping a close watch as the Rider disappeared through the doorway. He hardly knew what to do - did he call for the warriors, or find Stoick, or go after the Rider himself-

He barely had time to list the options before the Rider ran back out of his house, holding something under one arm and waving desperately at the Nadder.

If Gobber's sight had been better, he would have noticed how small the Rider was, and how different the leathers he wore were to the last time he'd been seen. He might have noticed the lack of a helmet, replaced instead with a rough hood and a scarf worn over the mouth. He might have even noticed the blue eyes and the short tufts of blonde hair peeking out from under the hood.

But his sight was poor and the Rider moved fast, swinging onto the back of the dragon as it spread its wings and shot into the sky.

As it was, it was only after the next raid, a month later, that Gobber noticed that two of his false legs were missing.

* * *

><p>"It's what?"<p>

He looked at the unfolded parchment again, scarcely believing that any of the past hour had happened.

Astrid looked at him from where she sat on the other side of his bed, hair mussed and lips bruised, and pointed at the designs on the parchment again. It had taken almost half an hour for her to remember her purpose and grab the parchment from where it dropped, before he grabbed her by the waist and dragged her into his shed, fully intending to continue whatever beautiful madness had been happening in the kitchen. Somewhere further away from Rhea's ears.

Once inside, she'd unfolded the parchment and almost made him forget about the urgent press of her lips. Almost.

"It's a shared mechanism. It won't be the easiest to walk on, but you might be able to alternate it with something more stable."

He was still staring in shock at the designs for a joint prosthetic and tail rig.

"Where did you get this?"

She shrugged and rolled down onto her front, resting on her elbows. "It wasn't easy. I had to steal your map and basically fly to every city and look for a mechanist rather than just a blacksmith. I ended up in Constantinople before I found one." She rolled her shoulders experimentally and winced.

"How long have you been flying?"

"Almost non-stop since last Thursday. I know I should have stopped but Stormfly was anxious and it's been easier since we found a saddle and... I didn't want to miss you waking up."

She looked down, avoiding his gaze. He ran a hand through her hair and down to massage her aching shoulders.

"I might still be dreaming if you're here."

She snorted, but there was no humour to it. "I should have been there. I should have been the one to explain, I should have —"

He dug his fingers into a knot above her shoulder blade and her words disappeared into a sigh of relief.

"You saved my life. There's nothing more to say."

There was a lot more to say, and he knew it. A lot more to do, too, but for now he wanted to pretend there was nothing but the two of them and the bed they both lay on. He felt her throat stretch and shiver as she yawned, and her head fell forward. She'd barely slept in more than a week.

"Sorry," she muttered, rousing herself with a sharp shake of her head. Her hair flicked with the motion and he couldn't help sliding his hands back up and into it.

"What happened to your braid?"

"Stormfly. Turns out Nadder sparks aren't too kind on hair, or rapists."

His grip tightened in her hair at the word and she inhaled sharply before he realised what he'd done.

"Would-be rapists," she clarified. "Won't be now, since they were burnt to cinders."

He huffed, almost satisfied at the idea, then twisted his fingers in the shorter locks.

"I can't plait this."

She smiled lightly. "Then I guess you'll just have to stick around until it's long enough."

She yawned again and stretched along the bed, then moved to get up.

"Stay."

The word left his mouth without his brain's say so, and he cringed, and back peddled instantly. "I mean, the bed's a bed and it's big enough and it's cold and the mattress will be cold and—"

She kissed him before he could keep speaking and his brain switched off, only comprehending that he should definitely shut up and kiss her back. When she shrugged off her furs and slipped beneath the covers as he detached his leg, he felt a swell of pride and hoped to all the gods he could end of each day for the rest of his life like this.

When he woke with her arms twined around him and her short hair sticking up all over his face, he made a silent prayer for each morning as well.

* * *

><p>It took two weeks build the new tail rig and prosthetic.<p>

During the day, she was gone - flying out before he woke and leaving food within arms reach so he wouldn't have to strap on the prosthetic before he was ready to face the day. She'd open the door of the shed and Toothless would bound in, and curl around the bed after a night on guard duty.

Where she went, he wasn't sure. He wasn't game to ask either. He seemed so entirely blessed by everything she did for him that he didn't want to question any of it - where she went, what she did, why she would climb into his bed and hold him in his sleep. On the days his leg didn't bother him, he could almost believe he'd died on Drago's ship and was living in some kind of Valhalla.

His leg did bother him though - every waking moment he spent on the ground was a reminder of how much it bothered him. Toothless grew restless two days after she returned, and the next morning Hiccup had woken alone, without Astrid or the dragon, only to see Stormfly nested by the forge and his old pedal rig missing. They had returned together at midnight, both windblown and exhausted, and had wrapped themselves around him in sleep. She kissed him again that night, although he wasn't entirely sure why. Astrid's lips seemed to have a mind of their own, and he could only follow them.

He had finished the rig late at night, so late that she'd been in bed before him. Rhea hadn't questioned the new sleeping arrangement - in fact, she seemed to have pre-empted it by putting such a large bed in his new room. He'd slipped beneath the covers with a promise to Toothless that they would test it first thing in the morning, and her hands had reached for him before he even realised she was already asleep.

The next morning, she'd been gone - but for the first time, he rushed out of bed to join her. Toothless had perked up his ears at the rattling sound of the flight prosthetic, and had almost knocked over the entire shed in his hurry to get outside.

Once outside, Hiccup faltered. What if it didn't work? What if he'd spent the past two weeks building a death trap? What if Astrid's mechanist in Constantinople was a scam? He'd made his own adjustments to the design, but that would all be for naught if the design itself was faulty.

Toothless huffed and pushed his snout under the rider's arm, pointing up. He caught sight of a bright blue speck on the horizon and realised he had no choice but to chase it.

Fitting the rig and prosthetic together was awkward. At least they both had five years of experience with Toothless' tail - his own foot was proving the most difficult part of the process. Where his muscle memory called for delicate touches and knowing pressure, he now had to wrench his entire leg from one side to the other. They sat on the ground for almost an hour as he ran through each of the positions until it finally felt right.

After an hour, he'd done half the positions and Toothless had had enough, shooting into the sky with a snap that said _You'll work it out._

Hiccup wrenched his foot back and they dropped instantly - Toothless screeched and righted them. Hiccup realised quickly that flying over the smooth meadows was a far better idea than dense forest, and was steering towards the smooth cliff tops when he spied the Nadder closing in on the cliffs.

Toothless needed no explanation to surge after her.

Trial and error was the only reason they caught up. Hiccup and Toothless were as unused to this kind of flying as Astrid and Stormfly were to flying together at all. Two months had been enough to establish a bond, a steering shorthand and a quiet, mutual trust, but was nowhere near what was needed for speed.

"Look at that!" Hiccup yelled once she could hear him over the wind. "The dreaded Dragon Rider, here to destroy Berk!"

She scoffed and tightened her thighs around Stormfly's flank - the dragon understood, and put on another burst of speed. Toothless' eyes narrowed, and the chase was on.

After almost an hour of circling the white cliffs, Hiccup started to notice that she would slow

Stormfly whenever he fell behind.

They flew until the sun had slipped below the horizon, sticking close to the cliffs in case the rig failed. When they landed back on solid ground, Rhea had smiled and come out to meet them, ruffling Hiccup's hair like a child.

"You almost don't look human again."

17. Snow Fight

"Astrid, I really don't think I'm comfortable with this—"

"Tough. We're doing it."

The snow had started falling again - he shivered as the flakes melted against his bare skin.

"Do we have to do this here? Aren't there warmer, nicer places?"

"Hiccup, I swear, if you don't stop complaining I will knock out the rest of your teeth and wear them as pearls."

"But I don't think I —"

"For all the gods Hiccup, hit me!"

Rhea had announced two days previously that she needed to go west, over the sea, to the lands of the Franks and their gold mines. Astrid had flown her, with the promise of returning in a week to fetch her back. Until then, they had the forge and each other to themselves.

So he hadn't quite imagined this being the first thing she wanted to do now that they were finally alone.

He was standing, bare chested in the snow, walking prosthetic strapped on, facing an axe wielding Astrid. He had a blunted sword in one hand, but would have gladly traded it for a shirt.

"You can walk and you can fly," she'd reasoned, "so you need to learn to fight with it too." She'd pointed at his prosthetic and a flash of guilt passed along her face. She'd never forget the crunching sound of his bones giving way to her steel.

He couldn't for the life of him remember why he wasn't wearing a shirt though.

Ah, that was right. He'd just finished shaving and cutting his fingernails and had started to feel human again, and he hadn't questioned her when she'd pulled him away from the sink and tugged his shirt off and shoved him out into the freezing snow. He'd learnt not to question Astrid in anything involving the unexpected press of lips or searching hands - he'd figured removal of clothes was just a new, exciting step in that process.

As the chill air stung his skin, he regretted asking so few questions.

Astrid spun her axe with one hand, threatening. "I'm giving you the first strike for Odin's sake!"

He shifted and wrapped his free hand across his chest. "That's the problem. I don't think I can attack a dangerous enemy unprovoked in the snow missing half my clothes. Call me old fashioned."

She rolled her eyes, then paused. "So if you were provoked?"

He didn't have time to think before she darted forwards and sunk a fist into his gut.

She had danced out of reach before he could react, and giggled. Gods, she was giggling.

He tried not to think of the way they'd woken that morning - for once, her back had been pressed to his front instead of the opposite, and he'd practically had to leap out of bed to make sure she didn't feel him, and skin him alive. He'd had to start waking before her each morning, although the sight and feel of her sprawled against him, even fully dressed, only made any natural reactions far worse.

She tossed her axe from one hand to the other. "Is that provocative enough?"

Oh gods.

He was suddenly glad of the cold.

When he didn't try to attack, she stepped up her game, hooking the rounded edge of her axehead around his prosthetic and tugging, dragging him off balance and into the snow.

He cried out as he landed with a thump on his back, and the snow seemed to burn into his skin.

"Hey!"

She rested her axe on the ground and leaned over it casually.

"What?"

He scrambled to his feet. "You know what. Stop it."

She narrowed her eye and grinned wickedly. Gods, this woman would be the death of him.

"Make me," she taunted, and bit her bottom lip.

He was on fire as he wrestled her into the snow. It took him a good five minutes for him to land a blow, five minutes in which she'd landed plenty, and even after he'd started gaining, she put up a good fight.

"Is that the best you've got?" She asked, ducking under a blow and smirking. "No wonder you always have to carry that fire sword - you're useless with a normal one."

He managed to smack the flat of the sword against her side, and she grinned as if she had been the one to hit him.

"How does that thing work anyway?"

She sounded almost casual as she spun on one heel, the flat of her axe striking his belly with searing cold steel. He staggered back, righted himself, and tried not to notice the way her whole body shifted as she bounced on her heels, ready for the next move.

"Nightmare spit," he explained, swinging the sword at her shoulder. She parried, metal meeting with a dull ring. "Coat the blade, wait til the opportune moment, then light it." Her brow furrowed, processing the new information, and he stepped in closer - she stepped back, off balance for the first time in the fight.

"Almost decent. Were you this bad in the cove? Cos if you were, I seriously regret losing to you."

He blocked a fist directed at his chest by grabbing it and holding it fast. She paused, not quite trapped, and noticed a scar on his shoulder.

"Odin's Ghost, was that me?"

His eyes darted down to the bite marks, and she used his distraction to pinch his nipple, hard. He dropped her hand and she danced away again.

That had done it. He wasn't sure if it was frustration or anger or just plain need that made him grab her shoulder and wrangle her down into the snow. She went with clawing fists and snarling teeth and bucked her hips to throw him off, all to no avail.

He pinned her arms above her, sitting across her thighs, and watched her chest heave as she caught her breath.

"Not bad," she panted after a moment. "For a talking fishbone."

She tried to twist her wrists out of his grip but he held fast. "Apologise."

She scoffed. "For what?"

"Freya's tits Astrid, it's freezing out here!"

She shrugged. "That's not my fault."

He leaned further over her, trying to intimidate her - she shifted with him, spreading her legs so he sat between her thighs instead of on top of them. He swallowed, and tried to think straight. "For hitting a cripple then."

"You're not a cripple, and you hit me back."

She shifted again, stretching, pressing her shoulders back and her breasts into the air. His focus faded fast as his blood, already rushing from the fight, began to head south.

"For this whole terrible idea."

She lifted her brow and nodded. Then sat up abruptly, freeing her hands and pulling his face to hers. As ever, he didn't question it, only returned her kiss with equal force. Something was different though - whether it was the adrenaline of the fight or the position they were in or the cold sting of the snow seeping through their clothes, he couldn't tell - but her mouth seemed warmer, more welcoming. He almost whimpered when she broke away, then groaned as she moved her lips along his jaw instead, soft bangs tickling his cheek.

She shoved him back into the snow on his back and pulled her legs out to straddle him.

He wrapped his arms around her, drawing her close against the sharp cold, and ran his hand along her back. She sighed lightly against his chin, and emboldened, he slid his hand further than usual, resting on the curve of her backside and trying not to think about the way it felt pressed against him in sleep. When she offered no resistance, he dug his fingers in, massaging the flesh.

Her lips parted against his chin with a moan, and he knew he had her.

Before she could make the next move, he pressed forward and kissed down her neck, alternating rough sucks and soothing licks and growing harder at the sound of each sigh. She stretched and tilted her head to one side, exposing as much of her neck as possible, eyes fluttering shut without her permission and an almost luxurious expression on her face. He reached her collarbone and sucked at the point where her neck met her shoulder, and felt the vibrations of her moan before hearing it.

He couldn't think, couldn't remember how they'd ended up kissing in a snowdrift with her hands running down his bare chest and his lips against her neck. All he knew was a blinding need that only she could relieve, and which her throaty sighs both soothed and built. He could imagine having her right there and then, in the banks of snow, with her axe and his sword lying somewhere forgotten to the side.

He probably would have, if Allayne hadn't chosen that exact moment to appear.

* * *

><p>"I didn't mean to interrupt anything," Allayne apologised, looking around the kitchen. "I just heard Rhea was gone and thought this would be the best time to see you."<p>

Hiccup shot her a glance that said, under no uncertain circumstances, she had picked the worst possible time to see them.

Astrid poured three steaming mugs of tea and set them out on the table. Both she and Hiccup wore thick blankets wrapped around their shoulders, and although he'd added a shirt he was still freezing and she was still soaked underneath. Of all of them, the whore looked most decent, wrapped in a thick fur over a mink trimmed dress.

There was something unspoken between her and Astrid though. Somewhere between jealousy and dislike was a strange kind of mutual respect.

"Dragon trappers have been passing through," she explained, wrapping her hands around the mug. "By the boat load. All headed up north, where there's money to be made selling into the army."

Hiccup raised an eyebrow. "Trappers? Does that mean..."

He left the question hanging, and Allayne didn't answer it. "You could destroy the ships in harbour, but there wouldn't be much mystery as to who did it. You're the only dragon rider within a hundred miles -" Astrid scoffed "-who is stupid enough to get caught." Astrid nodded, satisfied, and took a sip of the tea.

"When did you two become such good friends?"

"When my idiot husband got himself seriously injured and I needed everyone I knew to keep an eye on him while he slept."

Hiccup tried not to flush. No matter how much he joked about her being his wife, it was the first time she'd called him her husband, intentionally or not.

"Trappers is one thing - why go north?"

Allayne shrugged. "Word is he wants to test his army on the toughest he can find. If he loses, he regroup, but once he conquers, there won't be an army alive that would stand against him."

Astrid stiffened, mug held halfway to her lips. "Vikings?"

"Probably. Who else seems totally indestructible?"

Astrid couldn't help thinking that, as indestructible as Vikings seemed, she'd seen her home destroyed too many times to call them that.

Allayne finished her tea but kept a hand wrapped around the mug. Suddenly she folded forward, her face falling into her hands and trying not to sob.

"How old is he now?"

She breathed heavily and bit her lip. "Four. I swore to all that's holy I'd have him back for good by now, but Mamor would skin me."

"Then leave," said Astrid, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Go with them."

Allayne shook her head. "Trappers' boats are no place for a woman, especially whores. Even if Eret kept a claim on me, they're joining an army. Camp followers won't be asked nicely."

"If it's no place for a woman, how is it a place for your son?"

Allayne's grip on the mug tightened, and Hiccup almost took it from her for fear it would crack. "Eret takes good care of him. He brings him to shore every time he's near, orders me for the day. Even pays Mamor for the privilege, though she assumes he just wants to fuck me for old time's sake." She slumped over the table, the hitch of a sob in her voice. "I was fine with him going sea, but I don't want the boy going to war."

"And Eret?"

She wiped her eyes and laughed bitterly. "He has no life off the seas, and Drago conquered them before he even looked at the land."

Astrid wrapped an arm around Allayne, holding her close through the tears. She could feel Hiccup's eyes on her, but when she glanced over he was staring at her with a fierce intensity that made her blush and look away.

"We'll fix this Alla. He can't go to war if there isn't one to fight."

He spoke the words to Allayne, but his gaze was still fixed on Astrid, and she could feel that the words were as much a promise to her as to the grieving mother.

18. Choice

**AN: Hey guys - I just wanted to thank you so much for all the kind reviews. It really means so much to me as a writer to know you're enjoying how the story's unfolding. **

In other author news (both good and bad), the update schedule will be a bit haphazard over the next week or so. I'm headed down to the beach where there is sun and sand and family, but unfortunately no wifi. When I have it, I'll try to update, but sadly no guarantees.

So, as a going away gift, here's a super long chapter that I think a lot of you have been waiting for. Love you guys!

* * *

><p>She had been half frozen to death on a Northern peak, shivering and huddled in close to Stormfly, when it had finally hit her that she was free.<p>

The Nadder had tried her best to keep her rider warm, but she was cold blooded and warm breathed, so short of actually lighting Astrid on fire, there was nothing she could do. She had tried to clear the snow from the ground, but melting it had revealed a thick level of ice, deeper than Astrid was tall. In the end, she'd offered a wing and her side and Astrid had curled gratefully against her, trying to preserve what little heat she had.

The hairs on her bare arms stood tall, and she couldn't tell if she was simply cold, or they had frozen like that. The next market she was in, she was buying a shirt with sleeves. Or maybe separate sleeves. She'd seen some nice arm bands in Dublin, but of course she hadn't bought them, thinking winter wasn't due for another month. And here she was, freezing. She'd seen the snow capped peak marked on Hiccup's map, and assumed it was for illustrative purposes only. She had been wrong, it seemed. Growing up in Berk, she'd had frostbite on her spleen, but never her whole body.

The map.

She patted her pocket, reassuring herself that she still had it. She wouldn't take it out, not here in the face of every element, but it was good to know it was there to lead her home.

Home.

She hadn't thought of home in a long time. It had been more than a month since the people she had called her own had left her to die and unknowingly opened the world before her. After twenty years there, she knew she should think of Berk as home, but instead all she saw was betrayal and wedding braids. Rhea's kitchen had become her default home, whenever she was close enough, but the mattress on the floor was hardly welcoming, and was usually stiffer and more cold than Stormfly's flank.

She had sighed and rested closer against the dragon's flank, absentmindedly polishing her scales. The Nadder chattered appreciatively, although it was literally the least Astrid could do for her. In their past month together, she had lost count of the number of times Stormfly had saved her life.

"Atta girl," she crooned softly. "That's my beautiful girl."

Stormfly. She was as close to a home as Astrid had now. She spent each night curled against or beside the dragon, even in the warmer southern lands, and where there had once been cool, mutual necessity between them, there was now deep, unquestioning trust.

It was then that it had struck Astrid, with the force of a thousand blows, that she was free.

All her life, she'd craved freedom - freedom from chores, from structure, from expectation. To be free from the assumption that as a girl she was somehow inherently worth less than any man, to be freed from the idea that because her body could carry life, she was somehow weak. As she had grown older, those wishes had stayed with her, and the list of wanted freedoms eventually expanded. Freedom from Snoutlout's lecherous glances once her body began to shift into a woman's. Freedom from the dragon raids that tore her town apart. Freedom from the shame associated with her family name.

She could still feel the cool grass against her feet as she'd stood in her yard, simply wanting to be rid of her house-turned-prison.

And now here she was, far away from Berk and its small minded expectations, with an axe in her hand and a dragon by her side, and suddenly the world was hers. She could go anywhere - literally, anywhere. She had the map, and a dragon to carry her there. She could tell anyone who asked who she was that she was exactly who she wanted to be. She was finally, in all senses, free.

So why was she freezing on the side of some gods-forsaken peak in the middle of nowhere with nothing but the names of a city and a man who made metal limbs for a living?

Hiccup.

He'd still been sleeping when last she'd seen him, almost a week prior. His fever had finally chilled, and he lay peaceful in sleep for the first time since she'd sliced through his flesh and bone. She had felt almost useless, hovering by his bed without a cloth or food or anything to give him. One of the healers had given her a knowing look, and she'd shot back a fierce one.

She'd left the first sketches and a cautious scowl with Allayne, promised Rhea she'd be back again soon, and taken to the sky within a few hours, unable to sit by idle and wait for him to wake. Toothless had looked sadly up at her as she scratched his chin and tried to smile.

"Stay on guard, okay bud?"

Toothless had nodded, and shuffled a little closer to the bed.

She'd kissed his brow on impulse, and left. Up until now, she had always muttered that excuse to herself - impulse - as she stroked his hand or brushed his hair from his eyes. But with the sudden revelation that she was entirely free, she had to face the truth.

She didn't owe him anything.

She had saved his life. Whether or not she had owed him her life was up for debate - he had taken her from Raven's Point believing he was rescuing her, even if she had been as unwilling to go as she was to stay. Without him, she wouldn't have Stormfly, but it was saving him that brought them together, not any deliberate action. She had her axe, but she could have bought or stolen another. Everything he had done for her, she could consider the debt repaid.

But her chest still tightened and she felt a twinging in her stomach every time she saw the air where his foot had been that she hadn't felt since he'd destroyed half the village during a dragon attack and been chewed out by his father in front of everyone. He had walked away, to the taunts of the other teenagers, trying to maintain his caustic wit but looking crestfallen and hurt.

He loved her.

The thought came unbidden, and she tried to shove it down as the words of a man who wanted to leave no bitter words, especially after she kissed him. But the dark intensity of his earlier confession, that she was beautiful and she could stop his breathe and knock down the world, weighted heavy on her mind, and she knew everything he'd said was true. The way he'd looked at her, both that night in the forge as he gave her the axe, and in the cove as she'd run her hands over his skin, was almost worshipful, as if he could hardly believe she was real. He couldn't have faked it if he'd tried.

On that frozen mountainside, she had realised two important things - she was entirely free, and it was choice, not obligation, that sent her back to his side.

She had felt that twinging again, when she returned after three weeks to find him awake and standing, but she had banished it with the feeling of his lips on hers. She held him close that night, and whatever fever dreams and nightmares he'd had without her, he slept like a baby in her arms. She tried to stay teasing, light a playful, ignoring the painful truth that no matter what designs for rigs and prosthetics she found, she had been the one to sever his flesh. She kissed him when she wanted, which was from time to time, and flew Stormfly where she pleased, and at the end of each day, she chose to return to the shed and the shared warmth of his body.

It kept the twinging at bay, if nothing else.

That morning in the snow, she'd delighted in her ability to get him to fight back and knock her down, because anyone who could beat her in a fight couldn't be a cripple. His tattooed chest twisting and flexing in the fight had almost thrown her off, and she was left to wonder when he'd stopped looking thin and sickly, and started making her thighs clench at the sight of him.

Lying pinned beneath him, she couldn't help twisting her hips to see what reaction it got. The last time she'd been pinned by him, she had left bite marks in his skin, bite marks which still stood out in the litany of scars along his body. This time, she decided, she'd leave her mark more pleasantly.

She wasn't entirely aware of what she was doing when she started rolling her hips into his as his lips ghosted over her throat, but she liked it. She almost told Allayne to fuck right off and leave her to whatever had been happening. But once the heat of his body was gone from hers and she was left with a soaked shirt and damp leggings, she finally had to acknowledge it yet again.

She was entirely free. Everything she did was a choice.

Allayne's words sent another twist of guilt through her gut, at the memory of the battlements she'd set aflame. And as much as she repeated to herself that she had a choice, she knew she didn't - not in Berk's destruction, or in its defence. As much as she hated what Berk had done to

her, she couldn't sit by and watch it burn and bow to a madman.

As Hiccup and Allayne and Toothless disappeared from the kitchen, she was left to wonder why her heart chose to yearn for soft, dewy grass beneath her feet and the smell of ash and leather.

* * *

><p>"So what's our next move?"<p>

Allayne had finally left, completely spent after hours of quiet sobbing. Hiccup had flown her back into town, fearing for her in the thick snow, and returned to find Astrid standing in the kitchen where he left her.

He tried not to think of the words Allayne had whispered as she held him close before disappearing into the town. Instead, he focused on lighting the lamps around the kitchen as the midwinter sun set.

"Are you hungry?" He asked minutes later, when she still hadn't moved. She shook her head and crossed her arms, hugging a mug close. He found some bread and pushed it at her anyway. She shook her head again.

"They're moving towards Berk."

He put a hand on her arm and recoiled - she was freezing to touch. He grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders, but she didn't move and it fell to the ground.

"I've been back there, making sure they're defenceless, and now they're being attacked. So what's our next move?"

He sighed and slumped into a chair, rubbing his temples. "Kill Drago."

"How?"

Her voice was firm and insistent. His was tinged with anger.

"I don't know! I just have to... wait, and there'll be a chance—"

"You've waited two years. You had a chance, and it didn't work. And now he's headed north."

Hiccup slammed his fist into the table. "You think I don't know that?! You think that isn't the reason I need to wait, to make sure it works this time? If I can kill him—"

"Then what?"

He stopped. She stared.

"Then what? Armies don't fall apart because one man dies Hiccup. There'll be a chain of command, and as soon as you kill him they'll regroup and come back."

He shook his head. "No. No one else controls the Alpha. If they lose Drago, they lose the Alpha, and they lose every dragon they have."

"And what about their men? What about Eret and every other trapper and soldier and—"

He stood, shoving his chair back. "Why are you doing this?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Because last time you tried anything, you were lucky to just lose a leg. You can't do this alone, and you can't do it without a plan."

He scowled. "I'm not alone. Toothless and I did fine for five years before you showed up—"

"How is this my fault?"

"None of this would have happened if you didn't show up! I wouldn't have gone back to the same camp so soon, I wouldn't have been tracked, we wouldn't have ended up here and I wouldn't have been caught."

She snarled and stormed forward, grabbing him by the front of his shirt. "I didn't _show up_. You kidnapped me because you thought I was some waiting angel that knew everything you did and had the

perfect answer for everything. And don't you _dare_ blame me for everything except what I actually did." She released him with a shove and he stumbled, unsteady on his false foot. "Say it."

He pursed his lips, refusing.

"Say it!"

She was staring daggers at him and he didn't give a damn.

"Say what? You don't care what I think."

She grabbed a mug from the table and threw it at him, watched him duck as it shattered against the wall.

"Say that I crippled you!"

He straightened and stared - she panted, still curved into the throw. "Say that I cut off your leg and took away the sky and ruined your plans to keep running away. Say that if I hadn't turned up and cut you loose you could have died on the quest for revenge and convinced yourself you were a hero."

She grabbed his shirt again, dragging him down to her level, and spat the words in his face.

"Say that if I wasn't here you could give up and keep running away and trying stupid schemes until you got yourself killed. Say that I'm too tactical and cold, say I'm a heartless bitch who cut off your leg rather than trying to save it, but don't you dare, don't you ****fucking dare**** say that I don't care."

She bared her teeth like a wild animal and snarled in his face. He snarled back.

"What do you want from me?"

He stayed bent to her level, holding eye contact. When she tried to look away, he grabbed her face and held it fast.

"What do you want?"

She aimed a kick at his shin but he twisted away, taking her with him, her chin held tight between his fingers.

"You're free now. You've got Stormfly, and an axe, and you know more than enough of the map to live out your life in the sky. She wasn't your mother, and Berk betrayed you. You don't care about the dragons he's trapped or the cities he's burned. So what. Do you. Want?"

She couldn't believe it. She scoffed and stepped back, and he let her go, holding her gaze viciously. She wanted to slap him, but for once she repressed the violent urge and instead grabbed his shoulders and shook him hard.

"You."

She shook her head in disbelief, and punched him in the gut.

"For fuck's sake, are you blind?"

He doubled over, and in a haze of pain managed to tilt his gaze up to hers. There was pain and rage and relief in it. She took his face and pulled it up to her level, running a hand gently along his jaw.

"I want yo—"

He silenced her by surging forward, pushing her against the table and kissing her desperately. She leaned back and threw out a hand to support herself, clawing the other into his arm and shoving her tongue past his lips. One of his hands came up to dig into her waist while the other fisted in her hair, holding her close and keeping her from escape.

It wasn't enough - even as she moved his hands to her hips and he lifted her up onto the table, pushing a thigh between her legs and bending over her. She fought back, using her spare hand to grab the back of his head and push it down to her neck. He bit into it savagely, and she moaned victoriously.

It wasn't the warmth and comfort of their nights spent clinging together in fear of sleep. It wasn't the awkward and uncertain want she had felt in her belly that night in the cove. It wasn't even the teasing touches and fresh excitement of that morning in the snow.

It was raw, and real.

She arched and threw her head back, exposing as much of her throat as possible, as he kissed and bit and sucked his way from her collar bone to the patch of skin behind her left ear. A sly grin broke across her face as she tangled her fingers in his hair and guided him with moans and sharp intakes of breath.

He paused, breathing heavily into the shell her ear as she grabbed his hand from her waist and slid it to the outside of her thigh.

"Do you want this?"

He gripped the soft flesh of her leg and brought it up and around him. She gasped and dug her heel into the small of his back, pulling him closer to jolt against her and the edge of the table. He took that as a yes.

"And this?"

His other hand hovered at her waist, tentatively, before she took it and pushed it up against her breast, letting him stroke the soft flesh through her shirt and bindings. Her knowing grin cracking into something more primal, lips parted and panting. He took that as a yes as well.

"Do you want--"

She reached between them and grabbed at the front of his pants, finding him hard and wanting.

"You," she somehow managed to pant between the work of his hands on her thigh and breast and his breath on her ear and dear gods how many hands did he have? "I want you."

He nipped at the shell of her ear and drew away fast enough to see her eyes roll backward. Her mouth was open and he could feel the heat between them where the crease of her thighs met his hips. He took a moment to appreciate his handiwork, before her eyes cracked open.

She stared at him with half lidded eyes and bit down on her bottom lip.

"Will you have me?"

His hips surged forward of their own accord and he was in no position to stop his body as it pressed her back and down against the table, her thighs still clinging to his frame and mouths locked together. Her fingers scrabbled at his shirt, trying to pull it up and over without breaking the kiss and becoming furious when it proved impossible.

"Take it off," she demanded, breaking the kiss roughly, and she looked so angry and frustrated that he couldn't help laughing. "What?" She shoved his shoulder and tried to throw him off, but succeeded only in rocking her hips against his and sending a sharp spike of arousal through both of them. He groaned her name without thinking, and her self-satisfied smirk was back. She rocked again, harder, and it took all his willpower to remember where they were and the open nature of the kitchen.

"Shed," he managed to say as she twisted against him. "Privacy."

Despite every protest from his body, he pulled away and straightened - and completely forgot about her legs locked around him. Her back scraped along the table and she cried out in shock at the sudden movement.

"Oh gods - Astrid, are you okay? Fuck, I'm such an idiot!"

She looked up at him, dazed and confused from where she lay on the table, arms stretched above her head and still connected to him at the hips. He reached down and unfolded her legs, offering a hand to bring her up. She still looked confused as she stood beside him.

"You wouldn't hurt me, would you?"

He shook his head. "Never."

He looked around the kitchen at the mess they'd made - shattered mugs, upturned chairs, the table two feet to the right of where it had been.

"Good," she said, before grabbing him by the waist and throwing him over her shoulder. He folded over her like an unruly sack of potatoes.

"Astrid, put me down!"

She strutted out of the kitchen and towards the shed, careful in the snow. She squeezed the firm flesh of his ass for a better grip, and he yelped.

"This is undignified!"

"What we were about to do on that table was undignified," she replied, kicking the door open and shooting a pointed look at Toothless, who was curled up by the bed. The dragon took one look at his rider slung over the shoulder of his woman, and rolled his eyes. He slipped out past her with a look that said About bloody time.

She practically tossed him onto the bed and made quick work of his shirt before pushing him down and straddling him, hands pressing against his tattoos.

"This seems familiar," he said, grinning up at her. She rolled her hips punishingly against his - he hissed and began tugging at the folds of shirt bunched around her waist.

"I don't - uh - remember you being - oh - so talkative." She was struggling with full sentences as he ground against her, up towards wanting heat. He untucked her shirt and she pulled it off herself, tossing it into a corner to be forgotten until the morning.

She looked so damn smug, sitting atop him in her bindings, that he had to shove her to one side and roll on top of her, pinning her with his weight and running a hand along the exposed flesh of her waist as their lips moved in tandem. She took the change in position as well as could be expected, and began shoving and thrusting her hips, trying to throw him off and only serving to further his excitement.

Oh gods, this was really happening.

In their scuffle for dominance, her bindings became looser and his pants became tighter at the prospect of what lay beneath. Distracted, she threw him to one side and crawled onto his lap once again.

Noticing where his eyes were fixed, she grinned wickedly and hooked her thumbs into the strips of fabric, pulling down teasingly. Enjoying how distracted he was, she ground herself against him and pulled the bindings down another inch and watched him go boneless, falling back against the mattress. He thrust back into her, reflexively, and she didn't even realise she'd moaned his name until his eyes flew open.

"Say that again."

She bit down on her lip, and felt him throb against her at the sight. Emboldened, she leaned down as he bent upwards, his hands aiming for her sides. Her lips stopped an inch from his.

"Make me."

He sat up, pushing her onto her knees over him, and considered her carefully, thumbs running along the bottom edge of her bindings. She shivered in anticipation, and he smirked, before wrenching down the covering fabric and dipping his head to mouth at her breast. She melted into him, pressing the back of his head into her chest and running a hand along her other breast to even the feeling. His hand shoved hers away and took up the duty, rolling her hardened nipple between thumb and forefinger and making her throw her head back and moan in a rush of pleasure. She buried her idle hands in his hair and he took his cue from her clawing fingers. Satisfied, he switched breasts, nipping and sucking at the other peak until he heard her sigh his name again.

"_Hiccup_"

The sound went straight to his groin, and it was his own eager thrust that sent his jaw crashing down against her and her chin into the back of his head.

"Fuck!"

He leaned back, ready to spill apologies again for his uselessness, when he noticed her mouth hanging open and eyes fixed on him with what could only be hunger. Her hand slid down between them and grazed against the front of his trousers again, before sliding up and back down into them, cool fingers grazing against him. It took every inch of his willpower not to come at the featherlight touch.

"Take them off too."

He scoffed to hide the excited crack in his voice. "Seems unfair to me."

He barely had time to think before she stepped neatly off him, stood on the bed, and in one fell swoop from waist to toe managed to remove every remaining piece of clothing she wore. Then she scrambled out of reach before he could grab her and stretched luxuriously by the pillows, feet pointed towards him. Completely naked, from the roots of her short hair to the tips of her toes, a darker thatch of curls between her long, smooth legs and a self satisfied smirk on her face. She let his jaw drop before pointing with her toe.

"Pants." She commanded, and he obeyed. He stepped out of them and knew she was staring down at him, painfully hard and only growing more so under her gaze.

As soon as they were both naked though, time seemed to slow. Everything up until then had been teasing, testing, a competition - now, with the both of them bare and on opposite sides of the bed, it became all too real.

She was uncharacteristically silent as he stepped towards her, slow and even, trying to ignore his own nakedness as she pretended to ignore hers. It was only once he stood beside her at the head of the bed that he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her lips. It was soft, and chaste, and lit her entire body on fire.

He sat on the edge of the bed and set about removing the prosthetic, until a smooth hand rested over his and stopped him.

"Let me."

She undid each buckle and clasp neatly and efficiently, dropping the leg by his side of the bed. On a whim, she leaned down and pressed a kiss against the healed seam of flesh, and he tried not to think about the close vicinity of her lips. When she rose, it was with a look of tenderness to press her cheek against his.

Then he traced her scar with the tip of his tongue, and she pulled him down forcefully on top of her, dragging her lips against his.

They repeated the same motions as before - his hands stroking her breasts and waist, hers buried in his hair, tongues tangling and hips thrusting, but each reaction was stronger and louder as skin met bare skin. She could feel the press of his arousal against her thigh and reached down for it, smiling deviously as her hand closed around it and he stopped dead.

"So is this what's stuck against my ass in the mornings?"

She flicked her eyes down, and he whimpered, licking his lips tentatively. She ran her fingers up and down, judging the shape and loving every pained groan.

"Astrid... _please_."

She closed her fist back around him and dragged her hand up and down, slowly, staring up at him the whole while.

"Is this what you run away to do when you think I'm still asleep?"

She increased her pace and he groaned, seeking revenge and finding it when he pressed her breasts roughly together and buried his face in them. She let out a throaty laugh and tightened her grip.

"Do you think of me?"

He bit down on a nipple, trying to chastise her, but she wasn't giving up.

"Do you imagine it's my hand? Or my mouth? Or my quim?"

Thor Almighty, where did she get such filthy thoughts?!

She ran her thumb over the head as her hand jerked, and he shuddered and knew he had only seconds. "Astrid."

She slowed, but didn't stop. "Astrid!"

Her hand froze in place, gripping him tight. He let out a shaky breath he didn't know he was holding, then gently pried her fingers away from him. Before she could protest, he latched onto her collar bone, and her complaints melted into moans.

"You know what I think about?" He breathed against her skin, and she shivered as he slid down her body, taking a nipple in his mouth again briefly. "I think about you," he whispered against her ribs, "and your mouth," against her navel, "and your hands." He took one, and kissed it gently, innocently, as if his chin weren't pressed against the top of her curls. Oh gods, he hoped this would work.

He slid a hand up the outside of her thighs to where his mouth rested against her abdomen, and gently sucked on his own fingers, before moving his head to rest on her hipbone.

"But mostly, I think about what I could be doing to you."

He slid the moistened fingers down through the rough curls, and swiped along her slit. She _squealed, _bucking her hips into the air and almost throwing him off her completely. Only his firm grip on her thigh and searching touch against her kept him in place.

Tentatively, he stroked his fingers against her again, tracing the shape of her and trying to ignore the heavy panting and moans above him. He would lose it, he knew, if he saw her face now. And there was still so much more to give.

Those had been Allayne's words, whispered as he flew her home. _Do not waste that woman. Give her all the pleasure you can imagine, and ask nothing back. She has done more for you than you could even conceive, so don't you dare think about yourself. You can finish off with your own hand - if you're very lucky, she might even use hers. _

It was hard not to think about his own need when the sounds she was making had sent all his blood flow south.

She was warm, silky and moist against his touch, and when he brushed against a bundle of nerves at the edge of her opening she really had thrown him off, driving her hip into his chin and pushing his face up into her ribs. He decided to stay there, lazily tonguing the gentle rise of her breasts while his finger drew moans and gasps and his hand steadied her thighs open. He hadn't meant to slide his fingers inside of her, but he'd brushed the nerves again and she'd bucked and he'd slipped and suddenly he was there. Her panting deepened, gaining a desperate edge, and he slid his thumb forward to feel for the nerves and remove the intruding fingers when-

Gods above! She'd thought she'd been happy enough rocking against him on the kitchen table, fully clothed - yet all that paled into insignificance at the feel of his fingers sliding and pressing against her core and sending spears of pleasure through her. She sighed at the sight and feel of his dark hair, tickling her breast as he switched between looking at her face and his hand against her sex, grinning in awe at the sounds she made. She knew the feeling - the helpless look he'd had as she pumped his length had filled her with a sense of power and authority, of control where she drove him to total ecstasy.

Thinking of ecstasy, she pushed her hips down at the feel of his recoiling fingers. He looked up at her in shock, and she barely managed the words. "Again," she breathed, feeling the muscles of her core tighten against whatever was left of his fingers. His jaw dropped and he wordlessly obliged, watching as her eyes rolled back and she writhed against the mattress, completely at his mercy.

He thrust his fingers in and out, building a rhythm, increasing speed as he went. She felt hot and cold and sharp and hazy, all at once, but above all felt her entire body tightening, as if it were a string drawn to its very limits, about to snap-

Then he pressed the flat of his palm against her navel, and crooked his fingers within her, and the world came apart around her.

When she became aware of her surroundings again, he was bent over her, a hand pressed gently to her cheek, eyes full of concern.

"Astrid?! Astrid, are you—" She opened her eyes and he sighed, relieved. "Are you okay?"

"What the fuck was that?" She hissed.

His face fell.

"And when can you do it again?"

His gaze lifted, something like delight spreading across his features, and his hand began to slide down her body again, towards the thatch of curls and the desperate sounds she'd made only seconds ago, when she grabbed it, stopping his descent at her navel.

"Later, is when," she said, sliding the hand back up to rest against her waist. "For now..."

She rolled him onto his back and climbed over to straddle him, reaching for his length. His heart almost stopped at the sight of her positioned over him, tip already rested against her, ready to take that final leap. He didn't need to ask if she was ready, and she didn't need to tell him she was. Neither of them hesitated, despite a mutual lack of experience, and she sat down and he slipped forward, groaning in frustration. She tried again, biting down on her lip in concentration, fingers hard and hot around him. Their eyes met, and he throbbed at the sight and thought and feel of her, and as she sunk down onto him, it was as if the world had suddenly snapped into place.

She paused when her thighs met the point of his hips, teeth digging into plump lips as hands scrabbled for purchase on his chest, and it took all of him not to throw her beneath him and drive into her mercilessly. He reached out to steady her and she grabbed his hand and lifted it to her breast again. He fondled the flesh and she sighed at the familiar, pleasant feeling as it mingled with the sting of penetration. He could feel her heartbeat through her skin, fast and heavy.

She shifted her hips, searching for comfort, and his resolve crumbled. His spare hand flew to her hip and wrenched her down as he thrust up into her, seeking her heat. She was tight and slick around him, muscles clenching in ways he could never have imagined until now, and when she threw her head back and moaned deep in her throat, he knew he could never imagine another woman taking her place.

Who other than Astrid would talk of war until he finally voiced his feelings - who else could turn an angry question into passionate lovemaking? What other woman would throw him over her shoulder and carry him to bed and demand he take off his pants and guide him—

She pulled up, and sunk back down onto him, rolling forwards slightly, and suddenly he couldn't think, could only feel, from his abused scalp to his fingers rolling her nipple to her heat wrapped around him, around the entirety of him, to the curling ends of his toes. He thrust up into her again, and she mirrored him, and together they established a rhythm he both never wanted to end and desperately wanted to relieve.

She panted, barely able to believe the sharp thrums of pleasure building in her body again as the cord pulled tight—

"Are... are you close?" He managed to gasp between thrusts and moans. She nodded, not trusting her own voice, and looked down at him. Sprawled out beneath her, inside and through her, with his eyes fixed on her face.

She wanted to reward him, as he thrust up into her again. Reward him for the pleasure, the effort, for caring about her and wanting her and loving her and waiting until she wanted him enough to fuck him on the kitchen table.

He was almost there - each thrust was harder, a test to self restraint, as her wet heat grew tighter and their rhythm became faster.

"As...Astrid," he managed between thrusts. She met his eyes. "I... I love you... so... fucking much."

She pulled his hand from her breast and lowered her head.

"I love you too."

Then she took his hand and sucked on the fingers and everything imploded into the point where they met.

They came together, uncertain if it was her tightening that had triggered his spill, or vice versa. He screamed a bastardised version of her name as her lips stayed closed around his fingers, sucking hard and drawing him further into her and tasting herself on his skin. Her mouth fell open in a wordless cry and his hand slipped from her grip, gazing along all over her before resting where they joined.

She collapsed onto him, trapping his hand between them and against her flesh, still wet with saliva and _her. _He could taste her on her own lips when he kissed her, still inside her - no, that was wrong - still with her wrapped around him. They stayed there, pressed against one another, lips close enough to breathe the same air and move together without effort, until they had both stopped panting.

She rolled off him reluctantly, and they separated with a soft squelch. She suddenly became aware of how damp her skin was, sweat and saliva and come clinging to every inch of skin, and noticed how easily he had it, with nothing save for the moist patch along his groin and thighs where she'd straddled him.

She traced her tongue along his tattoos to rectify that, and he laughed at her competitive nature and pulled her flush against him, dragging a blanket over them and resting his lips against her ear.

"So," he asked, tracing sleepy patterns in her skin, "this is what you want?"

She slid a foot up and along his blunted leg, pawing at it with her toes.

"Freya's tits, do I have to spell it out to you?"

19. Plans

Astrid woke warm, and naked, and alone.

She came to slowly, piece by piece. First the soft blanket against her skin. Then the dull but delicious ache along her thighs and between them, as if she'd stretched further and deeper than she'd ever known she could. Then the lingering warmth beside her, and the total lack of Hiccup.

She started at the thought, sitting up abruptly. The blanket fell from her and she hissed at the sting of cold air against her bare skin, nipples puckering in protest. Looking around, she had to accept two things - last night had most certainly happened, and he definitely wasn't there.

The evidence of last night was everywhere, from the clothes strewn around the shed to the abused patches of skin on her neck to the crusting of dried spit and sweat all over her body. She ran a hand against her thigh and shuddered - it wasn't just spit and sweat. She was filthy.

Remembering a flash of their fevered lovemaking, she scuttled to one side of the bed, checking to see if his leg was where he left it, and frowning when it wasn't.

Fuck. No. He wouldn't.

Would he?

She had trusted him, in every sense, given him her hopes and fears and body, all to be shared. She'd thought he was as deeply, hopelessly and inexplicably enthralled in her as she was in him. He may have been first to kiss her but there was no denying that she had started this - from her confessions to throwing him over her shoulder and carrying him to bed. He'd put her first, she remembered with a jolt, bringing her to climax before even trying to jam himself into her.

He couldn't have faked all that just to get the mighty Astrid Hofferson into his bed.

Could he?

She sighed and climbed reluctantly out from under the sheets, reaching around for the nearest articles of clothing. The cold floor bit against her feet and she recoiled, untangling her socks from the roll of her clothing before standing again. Her legs were unexpectedly weak beneath her, and she squeaked as something sticky and vicious dribbled down the inside of her thighs. Unable to find her own shirt, she pulled his over her head and was about to go in search of her underwraps when the door opened.

She jumped, tugging the shirt down her legs only to expose most of her shoulder. Some distracted

part of her mind cursed the fact that he was so skinny, and his shirt was almost smaller than her own.

Hiccup almost dropped the bowl he was holding at the sight of her.

Astrid was used to having an effect on men. Ever since she was a girl, even before her first bleed, the boys and men of the village had favoured her toned figure and delicate face. She had always hated it, hated the attention her appearance drew, wanting nothing more than to be seen by the merit of her strength and mind, not beauty. Nothing had made her feel smaller or more misunderstood than the constant praise of her looks, the gazes that dropped to her hips and breasts to bypass the fire in her eyes.

But as Hiccup's jaw dropped and his pupils dilated, she decided maybe that effect wasn't always a bad thing.

Hiccup standing backlit by the cold winter light with his chest bare and pants slung low on his waist wasn't a bad thing either.

He stared for almost a full minute before she shifted uncomfortably. She'd assumed that the burning gaze would go somewhere, like it had last night, but instead he just stood and watched her, steam leaking from the bowl he held in one hand and also, bizarrely, from the cloth he held in the other. She cleared her throat finally, and his eyes flicked up to her face and sent a spear of fire into her belly. She could barely see the rim of green irises beyond hungry black lust in his eyes. Encouraged, she tilted her head and smirked, letting go of the shirt's hem and leaving it to hang loose, barely covering the apex of her thighs. She cocked her hip experimentally, and he swallowed.

"Are you just going to stand there?"

He set the bowl and cloth down and pulled the door shut, his pace even and his eyes never leaving hers.

"No."

The pull between them was magnetic - they surged forward together, meeting in a clash of lips and tangled limbs. He slipped on the cold floor and his gummed leg, but she caught him halfway and ran a hand beneath his pants to squeeze his ass and he suddenly forgot everything except her hands and skin.

She should be angry. She wanted to be angry at him, for leaving her alone and cold to wonder if she was just another pretty fuck to add to his list before he made tracks. But as his lips latched onto her pulse point and his hands slid under her shirt to glance along the curve of her hip, she knew he could no sooner leave than she could.

He loved her.

But if she wasn't going to get mad, she reasoned, she was at least going to get even.

She had shoved down his pants by the time he'd pressed her back against the bed again, and his hips pushed forward with each touch, searching for her warmth. With that same self-satisfied smirk, she closed a fist around him as he tongued at her neck, and dragged her hand down with vicious slowness.

"Why'd you leave?" She hissed into his ear before taking the lobe in her mouth and sucking it and sending spasms of pleasure through him. Why did she have to insist on taunting conversation while she drove him insane?

"You don't have to do this alone anymore."

He shivered and tried to find his thoughts as they took a prompt exit, stage left, at her teasing touch and searing words. _Because she's Astrid_, he thought in answer to his own question, as his hand snaked under the hem of her tunic - his tunic - and sought out the wet warmth between her thighs. Instead, as he teasingly combed through the dark curls, he found them dry and crusted, and her thighs against his wrist were cold and sticky.

She bit down on his earlobe, and his purpose came back to him.

He eased her hand away from his length, fighting the very essence of his human nature, and turned away. Confused, she withdrew, thinking her bite had been too sharp, but he gently took her face in

his hand and kissed her softly.

For once, the kiss was soft, sensuous - and she realised in all their time together, they had rarely met without fire and anger or the threat of death. This kiss though was gentle, chaste, and sent a soft glowing warmth through her, spreading and blossoming out from the centre of her chest. Even though she could feel the hard press of his arousal and her own response to it between their naked and entangled legs, it felt innocent.

His tongue slipped into her mouth almost without her realising, and stroked hers softly - she fell limp against the mattress, giving up any semblance of control when suddenly, he pulled away again. She followed him, confused.

"Lie down," he murmured, his mouth so close she could taste the words.

"Why?" She questioned, pulling at the hem of her shirt before he closed a hand over hers and stopped her. He slid off the bed, leg still attached, and picked up the bowl and cloth.

"Leave it on."

She would have told him to go to Hel for ordering her to do anything if his low tone hadn't reminded her so explicitly of his hands and mouth running against her, showing rather than telling her what he thought of doing to her.

"Why?" Astrid probed again, settling back into the furs patiently, propped up on her elbows.

He turned back to her, dipping the cloth in the bowl and wringing it out before reaching forward to take her foot. She pointed it into him, and he slid the sock off with a teasing slowness and a concentrated bite of his lip. She had to remind herself how insistent and determined he was to stop herself jumping forward and just taking him again. He looked more than ready - with his black eyes and his arousal jutting proudly from his hip. She felt at swell of pride herself, knowing it was entirely her doing.

"I want to take care of you," he said, running the damp cloth against the top of her foot, his thumbs massaging the sole and digging into the arch. She sighed deeply and fell back against the bed, and decided that she had, uncategorically, made the right choice.

He somehow managed to restrain himself all the way up to her neck. He returned her socks before he alternated calf for calf, thigh for thigh, then met in the middle to wipe away the dried and clammy evidence of their consummation. She had whimpered, knowing he could feel the heat of fresh dampness through the washcloth, but he had somehow wrung out the cloth and, with just a teasing slide of fingers against her, moved up to trace her hipbones under her shirt. The sight of his hand moving up her torso beneath the fabric felt censored, forbidden, and somehow all the more erotic for its suggestive rather than explicit nature, especially considering it was his shirt in the first place. There was something to be said for being forced to feel. He moved slowly, meticulously, and she was reminded of the bellows of the forge, stoked smoothly again and again until unbearable heat was built without a single roaring flame.

He was worshiping her, she realised. This was worship.

Once he wiped her neck and the rough bites he'd left there, he pressed a gentle kiss to the bruised skin, and she pulled him up to her lips. His naked body pressed flush against hers, both painfully aroused, yet their kiss remained sweet and soft. He carded a hand through her hair, smoothing out knots and sending sparks through her scalp as well.

Without words, she parted her thighs beneath him, and his hand slid down between them. Once he'd crooked his fingers within her and made her arch her back and scream his name, she pulled at his arousal like a friend left alone at a party, dragging him down to sink into her. He groaned at the tight pull as she enveloped him and hooked her ankles around him, trusting him with the motions, and she gasped into his ear as he thrust down and drove into her with relentless force. After what felt like hours of teasing foreplay and one sharp relief already that morning, it wasn't long before she was writhing beneath him, heels digging into the small of his back and teeth tearing at his bottom lip. She watched, already relieved, as he came, and though he would deny it when she teased him for the next three days, it was the sight of her blackened eyes staring up at him in complete satisfaction that finished him.

* * *

><p>She had insisted on bathing herself this time, calling Stormfly to heat the water before pouring it into the wooden tub.<p>

"No," she'd laughed as his searching hands closed around her waist and stroked along her hip bones, tugging her back into him. She didn't fight when his lips sought out her neck, sighing instead and resting against him. She was exhausted, and it was entirely his fault.

It was no exaggeration to say they'd made love all day - since the sun was now slipping below the horizon, it was precisely true. Each time one had tried to get up and actually do something, the other had pulled them back with lips and teeth and the whole thing had started over again, each touch as exciting as the last.

She was giddy, to say the least, at the prospect of being in love. She'd whispered, moaned and screamed words to that effect all day, yet each time she said it his face broke into the most amazed grin and his eyes crinkled and she fell in love with him all over again.

But with the sun fading and the day over, she had to face the realities that had forced confessions from her lips and sent them tumbling into one another. Drago was headed north, towards the archipelagos and the Vikings who lived there, to assert his might against the strongest warriors the world had to offer. Thousands would die, millions if he succeeded to conquer the continent and enslave dragons, and he had ruthlessly maimed the man she loved and killed his mother.

They needed a plan, and they weren't going to find it wrapped up in each other, no matter how hard they looked.

She should know - she'd spent the entire day looking very hard.

So she banished him to the forge with its fresh air that didn't smell of sex and satisfaction and banished herself to the laundry where Rhea kept the bath. Stormfly needed no instruction - the time they'd spent together searching the world for a mechanist had been harsh and tough, but both she and the Nadder saw cleanliness as close to godliness, and had assisted each other's bathing more times than each could count. She'd have to polish the Nadder's scales some time in return - provided her hands weren't busy for the next fifty or so years with Hiccup.

She started, realising that spending the rest of her life with Hiccup was no longer a threat, but a goal.

She had pulled his leg off after their first shared climax of the morning, insisting that with what she was planning, he wouldn't need it. And he hadn't, until almost midday, when he'd tried to get food from the kitchen - deviously planning to find something he could feed her and get all over his fingers so she would suck on them like she had last night. He had sat up, prying her hands from an in-depth exploration of his tattoos, and reached for the leg when she stopped him.

"Let me," she said, her words the same as they'd been the night before and that morning. He laughed and batted her hands away.

"Not falling for that again."

He was reaching for one of the straps when she grabbed his length, which had until then been pleasantly half hard from the feel of her fingers on his skin. She had made it her mission to drive him mad as soon as she'd stopped panting beneath him, and had spent half the morning teasing and taunting him before she finally let him find release within her. She had held his eyes the entire time, with a wry grin on her face at his complete submission, and when he finally finished he almost hadn't expected to live, let alone come back to himself with her blue eyes boring into his. He had tried to return the favour once he could feel his legs, but she had pushed him back and laid by his side, exploring the ink on his chest with a lazy intensity. He had doubted he'd be able to perform again for a while, but as her fingers closed around him, his brain was effectively disabled.

"I said - let me."

She had released him to deal with the straps and buckles, her torso resting across his thighs and stirring him further, until her words from the night before hit him.

Say that I crippled you! Say that I'm too tactical and cold, say I'm a heartless bitch who cut off your leg rather than trying to save it, but don't you dare, don't you ******fucking dare****** say that I don't care.

It scared him how easily she could see right through him, but it scared him more to think that she thought she was to blame.

He ran a hand over her bare back and gently drew her away.

"I don't think I ever thanked you."

Astrid raised an eyebrow. "I can think of a way."

She went to move his hand from her shoulder to the heat between her legs, but he slid across her collarbone and up to her cheek instead.

"Not for this. I, um, I was kind of hoping this would keep happening, and I'm scared if I say anything like 'thank you' you might disappear."

He grinned sheepishly, and she rolled her eyes. He decided then and there he could deal with her rolling her eyes at him for the rest of his life if he could have her for just as long.

"For saving my life."

She frowned, confused, then looked down at his leg and her hand resting against it. This time, he saw her expression - the same fierce, protective Astrid, but with a twist of guilt.

"I don't blame you. I couldn't. You didn't cripple me - you kept me alive. And I can't thank you enough for that. And... for everything else."

Her hand was warm against his thigh, and he slid it down towards the blunted edge of the stump. Apprehension lit up her face, but she bit her lip and followed him. He breathed deeply and searched for the right words.

"You're right too. I... I can't run away anymore. I can't pretend that killing Drago will fix everything and that I didn't almost hope I could die a hero without worrying about the consequences of it, and - that is your fault actually..."

She raised an eyebrow, unsure whether to be flattered or furious.

"In a good way," he added hastily. "Because with Toothless, it was just us and it was so much easier to run. But... you... and with—" He inhaled, trying to stop his voice from stumbling.

"Toothless keeps me in the sky, but I need you to ground me. Not with the leg - gods, that was the wrong word choice - but, you know, as in, you actually hold me accountable and you won't let me do another suicide run and—"

She kissed him, half relieved and half wanting him to shut up and put his mouth to better use.

"What I'm saying is," he said, once she'd let his lips free, "yes, you did this. But I don't blame you, or hate you, for any of it. And I can't keep running and we need a plan and I hope to all the gods you'll stay and stop me getting myself killed and wasting everything."

Her hand was still rested against his shortened leg, palm warm against him.

"I'm not going anywhere."

His heart surged, and if he hadn't known it before, he could have said he loved her without a shadow of a doubt from that small promise. Astrid, on the other hand, had bit her lip with words still to come.

"I... I hate that you're the one who has to live with my decision."

He held her fingers against the smooth flesh and kissed her, almost forcefully. She let him, and slowly the tips of her fingers began to stroke gently against the end of his leg.

She broke away suddenly. "Don't tell me it's fine, because I won't listen."

He reached down for the leg and began to secure it again. "Then I won't speak. Just let me show you."

She shivered at the memory of him taking her hand and standing up, carefully bringing her leg up and around his waist. His leg had been unsteady, slipping on the cold floor, but he'd counteracted it by pressing her against the shed wall and making it entirely clear that, in the last of their shared experience beyond flight and fistfights, he was entirely capable. Bath, she reminded

herself sternly, and shrugged off the one piece of clothing she'd managed to put on. She sank beneath the steaming surface, sighing. As nice as it was, a complete wipe down by Hiccup's hands couldn't replicate the relief of warm water seeping into her veins. Although getting him into the tub with her...

Stormfly peered at her, curiously, and sniffed pointedly. Astrid raised an eyebrow.

"Got something to say girl?"

The Nadder rolled her eyes - a habit she'd picked up from her rider - and settled in to keep watch while Astrid was at her most vulnerable. Her heart surged slightly at the knowledge of how well protected and loved she was. She compared the feeling to three months ago, being bathed and blessed by the old women of the village, and silently thanked whichever gods had sent her the fate she had rather than that which had been dealt to her.

There was a knock at the door, and both woman and dragon turned their gaze to it.

"Can I come in?"

She sighed and shook her head. "This is exactly why the door's shut Hiccup."

There was silence, then the sound of the door being pushed open. Before she could respond, he was inside, looking her in the eye with something between apprehension and hope.

"You said you've been back to Berk."

She furrowed her brow, trying to remember when she'd told him that. Ah, that was right - just before she'd started punching and kissing him.

"I have. I, um... what you said made sense, about it not being a target. But I knew they'd start reconstructions if you weren't attacking them, so while you were out..."

"You did the attacking," he finished for her.

She smiled and rested her arms against the side of the tub. "Stole some of Gobber's legs too. Tried putting them on you at first, only you've got the twiggiest legs I've ever seen."

"Hey - they're manly."

"If by that you mean attached to a male, then yes."

He grabbed a basket and upturned it, seating himself by the bath, but there was nothing lecherous about it. He was entirely focused on his thoughts, and the easy intimacy of their situation quietly thrilled her.

"How did you attack?"

"Same way you did. As soon as I got near enough, there were half a dozen dragons crowding around. I figured they'd been waiting for you - it took a while, but I think I convinced them I'm okay. They live in the caves between Thor's beach and the peninsula."

"And you've trained them?"

She shrugged. "I don't think trained is the right word, but they'll follow me into a raid. Aren't they yours in the first place?"

He moved the basket to sit behind her and dipped cupped hands into the water, bringing it down over her head. "I always brought dragons from the north for raids. I didn't even know there were any living on Berk."

He lathered the soap between his hands and worked his fingers into her hair, massaging her scalp and untangling the short locks. She raised an eyebrow.

"I knew something the great Dragon Rider didn't know?"

He smiled and dug his fingers into the hollows behind her ears - she almost slid straight down into the water.

"I thought we were planning."

"We are," he said, beginning to rinse the soap from her scalp. "I'm thinking."

Almost a minute passed in silence before he spoke again.

"We need to get close this time."

She nodded, her head taking his palms with the motion.

"And... I think I know how, but you're not going to like it."

She turned to look at him. "How bad is it?"

"Bad."

She nodded slowly, then kneeled to cup his face.

"Then where do we start?"

* * *

><p>AN: And we're back! Unfortunately, it's not for ever - I've had some serious family stuff come up that has meant my week at the beach turned into a week of travelling from city to city and trying to help where-ever I can, and I'll be doing the same for the next week or so, but I'll update when I can!

Also, there's been some wicked fanart of fierce short haired Astrid - check out yuccaox1 on tumblr (and all her other amazing art!). And I do the occasional doodle on tumblr as thaipothetical-situations, plus that's where I repost any other amazing Sacrifices art.

Thai out!

20. Little Talks

"So I never got an answer on the whole dragon cock thing."

Astrid didn't respond, but she didn't try to hide the relief washing over her at the sound of Ruffnut's voice.

"No, I'm serious," she said, pulling a crate over to rest by the door of the cage her friend was locked in. She looked over to the man standing guard by the lock. "What do you think? Dragon Rider - I know he looks human, but that doesn't mean all of him is."

The guard shifted awkwardly, and Astrid realised with a jolt that it was Gustav Larson, finally grown up. She hadn't recognised him - he had finally had the growth spurt he'd always threatened to have, and the beard that had been patchy and thin when she left had finally filled out.

Ruff punched him in the shoulder.

"Oi, I asked you a question."

Gustav kept his gaze fixed forward and his lips sealed tight.

"Fine! Be a boring stiff! Hey, speaking of stiff..."

There was a clinking of keys and a rustle of clothing, and before Astrid knew what was happening Gustav had stormed away from her cage and out of the Ring itself, tossing the keys into Ruff's lap.

"Shit, I thought I'd have to break out the strong stuff."

Ruffnut dragged her crate closer, just as it had been that morning, and talked as if Astrid had never left, as if they were sitting in the Hall after a day of docking lamb tails and she had bought Astrid half of the drink she'd promised.

"He's in camp 'if we ignore her, maybe she'll go away!' Poor guy's so put out by me fucking his sister's fiance - he should be thanking me! If I wasn't there, who knows what kind of shit Lout would be try on Hildegard? Hey, did you see the changes we made to the main gate locks?"

Astrid craned her neck to look over to the main entry of the Kill Ring, checking for new reinforcements, when Ruff's eyebrows shot into her hairline.

"Idiot was right," she said to herself, staring at Astrid's neck. "They do look like human bites."

Astrid's hand flew to her neck, scowling. "So you really are fucking Snoutlout?"

Ruff shrugged. "Say what you like - I've heard far worse from far better people. When it's swallow a cock or get killed, you know which option I'll take any day. But you, on the other hand," she said, leaning forward and trying for another look at the bruises, "I'm not sure which option you'd pick."

"You didn't give me a chance last time."

"Would you have taken it if I did?"

The hand she had held against her bruises relaxed, sliding down to rub at her neck.

"I don't know."

"Yes you do. You've made a choice and let's be honest, we both know I'm gonna have to report back to the Council about this - you're not an idiot and Gustav's probably running up there now to tell them the slut's having another go at getting the virgin savage to talk, so—"

"What do you get if I talk?"

That shut her up. In fact, Astrid couldn't remember a time she'd been successful in stopping one of Ruff's rants. She'd have to mark down the date.

"If I talk," Astrid continued after almost a minute of silence, "will it help you?"

Ruff frowned and moved her mouth silently, as if rolling Astrid's words around her tongue.

"If you give them answers—"

"I heard you the first two times, idiot." Ruff's eyes narrowed. "What do I have to give you in return?"

Astrid shrugged. "A chance?"

"Shit. You want me in on this whole peace bullshit."

"You know this is genuine Ruff, you do. You know me, you know I wouldn't—"

"Do I? Do I know you? Because the Astrid I knew got carried off and raped because I was a selfish slut and now you're here and you look a lot like her, I'll give you that, but you've got his hands all over you and I don't know what else he's forced on you!"

Her words rang through the ring, bouncing off stone surfaces and coming back to Astrid's ears, more and more accusing every time. Ruff's heavy breathing followed, six months of fury let out in a single sentence, and Astrid could see her hands balled into fists on her thighs.

It took Astrid nearly two minutes to speak, as every accusation, every fear and every threat she'd ever faced coursed through her.

"Ruffnut," she said evenly, in a low voice. "If you blame yourself for this again, I will personally knock down this door and beat you to death with your own shoes."

Ruff snorted. "Easy for you to say. Haven't had new boots in years - it'd be like slapping me with warm cabbage."

Ruffnut shifted, awkwardly. Forgiveness was a foreign concept for Vikings - she'd had to apologise to pretty much everyone on Berk over her lifetime, but she had never actually meant it. Neither had her promises to forgive and forget ever panned out without plans of revenge and blood. She didn't like the idea of accepting kind words where harsh actions had been.

But that was what Astrid was offering, without question. She wasn't blaming Ruff as Ruff blamed herself, and that terrified her.

"He's a man."

Astrid was looking at her, blue eyes boring into her skin. She looked up and met the gaze, determined.

"Not a demon, not a dragon. A man. And he wants peace."

Ruffnut seemed less than convinced.

"He doesn't control the dragons - they follow him. And... he walks with a limp, and his hair sticks up in the mornings and he gives the best back massages known to man. He flies on the Nightfury, but it isn't anything like what we thought - it's kind, and smart, and the only time I've seen it fierce was when it was protecting him or me. And he's honest, and brave, and intelligent. and--"

"Urgh - quit sounding so in lo-- oh shit. You are."

Astrid had no better answer than to nod. Her eyes were mixed with tenderness and resignation.

"Well that answers the cock-swallowing question."

"No!" She banged at the metal door, half to get Ruff's attention and half in anger at her suggestion. "It's not like that. He didn't touch me, or - well, he kissed me, once, but that was awkward - then I tried to seduce him so he touched me when that was happening, but that didn't work so other than that - look, I never meant for this to happen. Fate is cruel, but for whatever reason it's taken pity on me. But I love him and I miss him and I don't know why and I can't explain any of it, but I need you on my side Ruff!"

Ruff raised an eyebrow. "Anyone ever tell you you've started to talk like Hiccup?"

Astrid stiffened, and Ruff passed it off as half a decade of rivalry and anger at her ruined Dragon Training victory.

"Anyway, that won't convince the council."

"Then what will?"

Ruff shrugged, but Astrid could see a hint of a smile twisting the corner of her lips.

"So I never got an answer on the whole dragon cock thing."

* * *

><p>Rhea hadn't argued. Instead, she had taken one knowing look at Astrid when she climbed onto Stormfly's back, and raised an eyebrow at Hiccup as soon as they landed. Toothless stood by him with a loaded saddle bag, and he was dressed as close to his flying leathers as he'd been able to reconstruct.<p>

"So I suppose the two of you will be moving on?"

Astrid nodded darkly. "There's war coming. To Berk. We can stop it, but--"

Hiccup grasped her hand and threaded his fingers through hers. "It's our chance."

Rhea wasn't convinced. "You said that last time."

She didn't miss Astrid running her finger over the back of his hand before he spoke again. "It's different now. I'm not running away and I'm not trying to do this alone again. I'm... I'm ready."

She had embraced them both, unable to untangle them. Astrid had half expected Rhea to let them leave without a word, but she stepped back and disappeared into the forge, rummaging in the cupboards in the kitchen.

"I suppose you've already nicked enough food to get you started?"

Hiccup grinned and nodded, and let Astrid pull him by the hand back into the kitchen, just as Rhea straightened, a small wooden box in her hands.

"This is yours, I think," she said, pulling out a thin cord and a pendant. "You left it on the floor one morning. I nearly killed myself stepping on it. Figured you didn't need it for now, but, well, for now..."

She held it out, and Astrid recognised the Zippleback tooth pin. It was only then that she realised how long she had gone without it. Hiccup frowned at it.

"Your pin?"

"Don't need it for her hair anymore I'd say, but it'll still do what it's meant for."

Astrid nodded and slipped the cord around her neck.

"What it's meant for?"

Rhea looked at Hiccup like it was obvious. "It's a tooth, you fool. Zippleback. Won't kill a man at a distance but will kill him up close."

Hiccup's eyes widened, as with sudden shocking clarity, he remembered each time she'd reached for the pin in her hair. He looked at Astrid, indignant. "Were you going to kill me?!"

She returned his raised eyebrows. "You were going to kill me!"

Rhea rolled her eyes and noticed that their hands were still clasped firm. She put a hand on Hiccup's shoulder and tried to bite back tears.

"Don't fly with a helmet Hiccup."

His brow furrowed, confused. "I don't have one - I lost it."

She clocked him over the head. "You know what I mean. She does too." She pointed at Astrid, who blushed. "She flies with her face in the wind and the world at her feet. And I'd dare say you should now too. The time for hiding who you are is gone."

She watched from the forge as they finally let go of each other's hands and climbed onto their dragons.

"The shed is always here," she called in parting. "Whatever ungodly things you've done in it."

She kept her smile firm to hide the tears as they flew away.

* * *

><p>She had taken his plan as well as a pitcher of rotten yak's milk at first, picking apart every issue, inconsistency and foolish assumption he had made. He'd been hoping she would, because once she'd been through every details and almost entirely reconstructed the plan, it was a damn good one.<p>

It took almost all of their week together to cover every detail. Not that they had devoted all of their time to it - not in the slightest. It was his fault, she'd panted against his chest, breathless and still shaking in the afterglow. As soon as they disagreed on one issue, they'd argue about anything, from the plan to her temper to his dismal attempts at braiding the hair that hung over her ears, and within minutes they were shouting and shoving and kissing and tearing each other's clothes off. Then, inevitably, somewhere between teeth and fingertips, one of them would manage to choke out an answer, and they'd celebrate by doing the whole thing over again.

"I should have kidnapped you years ago," she wheezed on the fourth day, after a particularly successful breakthrough in planning. She couldn't see him, could only feel the shift of his hair against her thighs and his breath glancing against her, cooling the heat he'd stirred.

"I could have kept you in - ah - in the barn, and solved all the village problems."

She could sense him smiling against her, before he spoke.

"I was the village's main problem though."

She slid her fingers through his hair, gripping the dark locks and pulling him in closer.

"Exactly. Probl-- sweet Freya's quim! - problem solved."

The night before Rhea was due to return, she had drawn a bath and soaked in it as she repeated each step and detail of the plan back of him, and slapped him each time his gaze drifted lower than her collarbones.

"Focus," she warned, before standing and stepping out of the tub. He dutifully kept his eyes locked on hers as the water drained down her skin, following gravity on the most alluring path he'd ever encountered. He raised an eyebrow when her hands moved to the ties of his pants, and she slapped him again, a little harder than playfully.

"Focus," she repeated, undoing the knot before moving her hands to his shirt and pulling it off. "I don't want Rhea sniffing you tomorrow and rolling her eyes like Toothless does."

He couldn't help grinning as she turned his shirt the right way out and folded it. "Stormfly does the same."

"Gods, and it's bad enough from her. Toothless just seems... seedy."

"He's impressed," he replied, pulling off his trousers and almost passing out when she dropped to her knees.

"Don't get any ideas," she said, unbuckling the straps of his leg. "And what do you mean, impressed?"

"Any ideas I have, you gave me in the first place. And he's impressed that you were able to resist my raw Vikingness for so long."

She laughed so hard that she fell onto the floor, resting her head against his knees as her body shuddered with mirth. He laughed too, eventually, once he'd gotten a good eyeful of her clean, naked body. He could make her laugh - in as many ways as he'd ever dared to hope. The thousands of dreams his mind had conjured over the past five years had paled in comparison to her clear, almost brutal laughter and the way her shoulders shook and her eyes crinkled when he made a joke at his own expense, or hers, or tickled her sides mercilessly, or twisted his hips against hers-

She managed to stop laughing long enough to undo the last of the straps and straighten to offer him a secure shoulder. He expected her to make a dig at how very impressive he was, probably followed by a teasing grab at his stirring hardness before she pushed him into the bath - but instead her face had softened, and she took a moment to kiss him sweetly, lips working almost tenderly against his.

"I'm going to miss this."

The words brushed against his cheek and he could feel how hard she was trying to keep her voice steady. He sighed and kissed her again. "I'll make up for it?"

"That won't stop me missing you."

He decided to try for seductive, sliding his hands down to her waist. "You could always... think of me?"

He knew as soon as the words were out of his mouth that they were wrong, and she raised a disbelieving eyebrow before upping the ante.

"You'll be alone - I won't. I'll have to find some quiet cabin every time I get stuck thinking of you, and your stupid laugh, and your hands, and your mouth," she leaned in to whisper the last words into his ear, "and your pathetic attempts at seduction."

Despite the joke, he shuddered at the idea that she could be a thousand miles away, surrounded by strangers and working her own hands to reach the writhing, panting mess he loved to leave her in, all at the thought of him.

"Then I guess I'll have to come back as soon as possible to sweep you off your feet and take care of your wanton womanly urges?"

She laughed gently against his lips and slid a hand down to grab at his ass, the other resting against his chest. "Not going to run off with the first whore you see?"

"Well, since we're seeing Allayne tomorrow- ah! Astrid!"

She cackled as he fell ass first into the tub at her shove. He rubbed the back of his head and she laughed even harder, so he splashed water at her in revenge until she shrieked and ran around the tub to kneel behind him and wrestle his forearms against his chest and out of harm's way. He tried to twist out of her grip but she held firm, rotating him and dunking his head under the water.

"Allayne isn't going to like it. Any of it." Astrid warned, finally trusting him enough to let go of his shoulders. He flicked the droplets still on his hands at her on principle, then shook his head as he considered her words.

"She's going to hate it."

"No," Astrid said, sliding soap between her still wet fingers and trying not to get suds on the rest of her clean skin as she sat on the basket at the head of the bath. He'd left it there, after the first time he'd washed her hair, and it had become a nightly ritual - although getting him into the bath after her always proved to be a challenge. He was like a reluctant child, despite being everything but reluctant. He didn't want to admit that he loved the smell of her on his skin so much that he didn't want to wash it away. She'd think it was creepy. It probably was creepy. Okay, it was definitely creepy. But so long as she kissed him until he agreed to actually get in the bath, and he knew she would still be there when he got out, he figured he could deal with it. Getting to actually kiss and hold and please her was so much less creepy anyway.

"She's not going to like it. There's a difference."

She worked her fingers through his hair, lathering the soap and enjoying the cool, slippery feeling, and his face relaxed completely.

"How much do you know about Allayne?"

He felt her shrug, the motion carrying through her shoulders and arms and into her fingertips woven through his hair.

"As much as she'd tell me. We didn't really start out well, but...I took letters for her."

"Letters?"

"Letters. Eret started it. I was keeping tabs on Drago so I was ending up in a lot of ports full of his men - he saw me in Dublin and recognised me, even without an axe at his throat. Didn't try to kill me, just wanted me to wait while he wrote something and asked me to deliver it next time I saw her. That was back when I was back every few days, since I didn't know if you'd be awake or dead when I got back. Anyway, I had to go to Camant for Rhea and I was out of money, so..."

She left the sentence hanging to massage his scalp, and he grinned when he realised why.

"You blackmailed her?"

She scooped water from the tub and he kissed her elbow, since it was right there.

"I think she respected me for it. Didn't want me giving anything to Eret, but she had a note for the boy, and a blanket he'd left behind and Eret said he couldn't sleep without. I gave it to the kid myself, next time I saw them in a port. He doesn't speak much."

"He's a good listener," Hiccup countered. "That boy knows more about Drago's army than most of his men would."

"Just like his mother then." His hair was clean but she kept pouring water over it anyway, liking the way it streaked down his back.

"She loves that boy," Hiccup finally said. "I could have sworn she loved nothing before I saw her with him."

"Which is why," Astrid said, shivering and finally searching for the towel she had brought with her, "she won't like it. But she'll agree, because she'd rather take a small chance of being together than a guarantee of being apart."

Convincing Allayne of that opinion had been more difficult.

"No way," Allayne had said bluntly.

"Why not?"

"Because it's insane! And if you're found out, it won't just be you who'll be hanging from a mast."

Astrid had shot a look at Eret. "Do you have an opinion?"

"If you want my opinion, she'll give it to you."

Hiccup scowled. "You know this is the best chance we'll have. If we pull this off, the war will be over within a few months, and you can go back to fishing and hunting mermaids or whatever it was you did before Drago branded you."

Eret flinched, a hand automatically coming up to his chest.

"And what if it doesn't work?" Allayne spat. "You'll all be killed, Eret too and I am not letting my son die for your stupid schemes."

She had tightened her grip on the boy's shoulder as he slept peacefully through the argument. Astrid quietly envied him.

Allayne's eyes flashed with a fury Hiccup had only seen a few times before, usually in Astrid's face, or his mother's. He was suddenly struck by how many of the people in his life were women, and how they'd almost universally been better than the men.

"Allayne," he said softly, "this won't be easy. But there won't be another chance like this. The boats are shipping out, and it makes sense for new crew to join them. No one will look twice, even once everything's in motion. Allayne... please."

Her eyes softened, but her mouth stayed a firm line.

"You swore by all that's holy that you'd have him back by now." Astrid's voice cut clearly through the room, plain and honest. "Give him to us, and in a few months you will."

Allayne's grip on her son's shoulder only tightened.

Eret sighed heavily and sat down beside her on the bed. "He's my son too Alla. It's there in his name. And I want him to grow up safe, with a mother, away from a war - and unless we let them do this, that will never happen. He'll grow up alone, and bitter, and he'll fall in with the wrong sort when he's half a man and end up like me."

They had sat in silence for long minutes, listening to Allayne's quiet sobs, before she finally spoke.

"If he's hurt, and you betrayed him, I'll kill you all myself."

21. Bound

The sun was low and the docks were crawling with men by the time Eret returned to his double masted ship. The crew were already waiting - few had even left the ship over their week in the Camant docks, preferring to send out one man to buy cheap booze and spend their shore leave on the familiar rocking deck. The more enterprising tavern keepers and whores went down to the ships themselves, charging premiums for service to the superstitious soldiers who believed that once a man set foot on land he was tempting fate to drown him. The sea was a cruel mistress, which most of them had served since childhood, and they would not tempt her jealousy by setting foot on English soil.

Eret was late, as he always was in Camant, with an apologetic barrel on his shoulder and an unusually cheery expression. The boy trailer behind him, although it was what trailed after the boy that caught the crew's attention.

A woman. A short haired, vicious looking woman, draped in a blue scarf with a sharp axe and sharper eyes.

Eret set the barrel down in silence, as the crew waited for his explanation. He dusted off his hands and gave them a thin grin.

"This is Allayne," he said simply, and left her to answer the questions.

Astrid's hand surreptitiously slid to the pendant around her neck.

"The whore?"

"The boy's mother?"

"What the fuck is she doing here?"

Astrid straightened, and looked accusingly at Eret. "Is that what you told them I was? A whore?!"

"An English whore with red hair," called one of the men from where he coiled ropes and watched their conversation with interest.

One of the crew, a smaller man with a plaited beard, squinted up at her, recognition lighting his face. "You're the legs he was after in Dublin, aren't ya?"

Astrid scowled, knowing she had to sell this. "An English whore with red hair - is that who you're fucking when I'm on my ship and you're on land?"

"That's who he's fucking whenever we're in this port."

Astrid was surprised at how good she was at channeling anger into the act. The thought of her first meeting with Allayne, all soft skin and alluring eyes, came to the front of her mind, and briefly she remembered how it felt to think that Hiccup, for all his promises and declarations of love, had been spending his idle hours inside her.

"Oh, is it?"

She stared daggers at Eret, who scowled and played the jilted lover card back at her. "Like you haven't had every blacksmith from here to Scandinavia."

"At least I'm not paying for the privilege!"

There was something fun in arguing with Eret - like there was a shared private joke in fooling the crew. It was different to arguing with Hiccup, which inevitably led to shouting and sarcasm and fingers shoved roughly into leggings against walls. This was... hilarious, if she was honest.

She turned to the crew, unstrapping her axe and gripping it pointedly.

"Let me make one thing very clear to you, since I doubt your simple heads can deal with much more than that. I am here to work, and care for my son, since this idiot," she jerked a thumb at Eret, "think's it's fine to take him to whore houses and taverns and bet him in card games."

Eret groaned. "It was dice."

"It was stupid," she retorted, fixing him with a withering glare and trying not to laugh. "And since my ship got destroyed by your boss, who thinks pirating isn't a legitimate business," she poked him in the chest with the axe, "I'm staying until I have a new one."

"Pirating?!"

She tossed her head proudly. "Heard of the Bog Burglars?"

Several of the crew nodded, and there was an almost audible shift of hands to coin purses.

"Well, you're looking at one. And I'd keep a firm hand on your purses and away from any part of me if you want to keep them."

The rope coiling man paused. "The purses?"

"The hands."

She put a hand on the boy's shoulder and stalked away, taking him with her below deck.

"Did you understand that?" she whispered, keeping an eye on the rest of the crew. The boy nodded, then his face cracked into a grin.

"You're a scary mother," he said, "but a good one."

She smiled and ruffled his hair. "Okay then, Eret son of Eret - show me what there is to know on this boat."

* * *

><p>The more time she spent with Eret, the more Astrid was sure she liked him.<p>

She'd been skeptical at first. Even when he'd chased her down in a Dublin market, recognising her by her battle axe instead of her braid, and after running through half the city had simply asked her to deliver a letter, she'd doubted him. Any man who fell in love with a whore had to have been in a whore house in the first place. Of course, Hiccup had ended up with a whore for an informer, but he was different, she rationalised. He hadn't touched Allayne, while Eret obviously had - and had the child to prove it.

In their vague interactions while she delivered and took letters in foreign cities and ports, she'd always been on guard. Once he noticed, he rolled his eyes. "Don't worry, I'm not going to try it on you," he said when she refused an offer of a drink. "It's hard for a man to get into a respectable alehouse round here alone, and any of the ones I'd get into alone, you wouldn't want to see. Anyway, you're not my type."

"You mean I'm not a whore," she'd said bluntly.

"No, I mean you're not Allayne."

"No thank you," she'd said curtly, and turned away to where Stormfly was waiting for her.

"There's a storm coming. I'm not trying for your leggings, I promise."

She'd scowled, sniffing the air. He was right. He was also the first human she'd had an extended conversation with in almost two weeks.

"One drink," she'd said, hefting her axe back off the saddle. "And anything you try, Allayne will know."

He'd smirked at that. "Anyone ever told you you really know how to make a threat?"

They'd ended up drinking in a tavern filled almost entirely with locals who shot them questioning looks every few seconds. Eret was recognised, and drinks poured, and within an hour her tongue was loose and spilling her fears for Hiccup.

"I don't even know if he'll be alive when I get back every time or if he'll just be a lump of dead flesh with a flightless dragon and a whole mess left behind. And I don't even know how I feel about him but I definitely don't want him dead - not anymore at least, although I don't think I could have really killed him at all-

Eret had nodded, knowingly. "It's hard to be a thousand miles away with no way of knowing."

The alcohol in her blood had been enraged at the idea that he could understand what she was going through. "What, not knowing which paying client she's fucking as you're off at sea with her son?"

He had scowled and occupied his mouth with drinking to stop harsh words. She had had no such scruples.

"Do you have to pay her each time, or do you get some kind of loyalty bonus now? Although if I were her, I'd be charging you more for damaging the goods."

She drank more, not knowing if it was whiskey or ale in her cup at that point.

"It's not like that."

She snorted, then gagged as the liquid went up her nose. "You fathered a son with a whore. How exactly is it 'not like that'?"

"I didn't know she was a whore."

Astrid rolled her eyes. "What, you thought she was just a beautiful young woman in a whore house who was overcome by your manly charm?"

He shot her another black look. "Are you going to let me talk or keep judging me at the end of

each sentence?"

She shrugged. "Probably the judging."

He rolled his eyes. "I've been listening to you trying to deny that you want to fuck Hiccup for the past hour - you could at least give me five minutes."

"Oh, so you've been judging me too?"

"You definitely want to fuck him. I'm surprised you haven't - actually, no, I'm not, he's so scared of girls he wouldn't know what to do if you actually stripped in front of him and sucked his cock."

She hid her flush under bitter words. "Has Allayne tested that?"

He knocked the mug out of her hand and it smashed against the floor, shards of clay ricocheting off the stone slabs. The tavern became eerily silent.

"Don't ****ever**** say anything like that again."

She held his violent gaze, then reached forward and took his mug. The conversations around them slowly picked back up as she took a heavy swig of whatever he was drinking.

"Five minutes. Change my mind in that and I won't."

She took another drink, watching him trying to compose himself over the rim of the mug.

"I was nineteen," he said finally, tapping a fist nervously against the tabletop. "Nineteen, and stupid. I'd finally gotten my own ship, and I was proud as a fucking peacock, strutting up and down the docks in Camant, making sure everyone knew I'd been given the command and I'd be in charge of my own crew. It was the first time I'd ever been in the port - Drago had only just started gathering forces, I was one of the first - all these Angles were watching me like I was some lunatic. Probably was. Anyway, I'm ruffling feathers and fluffing my own cock and looking like an absolute prat, and then - I see her."

His eyes softened, and his brow relaxed at the mere memory. Astrid resisted the urge to scoff.

"And I mean, she is like nothing I've ever seen. I've seen docks and crews and ships my whole life, and I've seen pretty girls - had a few fisherman's daughters if I'm honest - but she is just... something. And she sees me, this idiot, but she's looking at the ships. And she comes over to mine, and I can hardly speak, cos - look, it's like I've drunk salt water my whole life, and for the first time, I'm tasting something pure. And she starts asking about the ship, and the double mast, and where it's come from, and I'm stumbling over answers and making a bigger cock of myself than before, but she keeps asking. And she seems a bit nervous sometimes when I'm talking, but she's nodding and paying attention and she's so fucking beautiful and she's talking about _ships_ and I can hardly breathe."

He paused, and reached forward to take the mug from Astrid's hands. He went to drink, only to find she'd already emptied it.

"Anyway," he sighs, putting the cup back down on the table, "we end up talking for hours. She says her name's Allayne, and even that's fucking exotic and beautiful, and she asks to see around my ship, which is the biggest fucking ego trip I can imagine. And then it's midnight, and somehow we're still standing on deck and I'm shipping out in the morning, and I think if I don't kiss her I'm going to regret it for the rest of my miserable life - and she kisses me. And I'm thinking 'fuck, what do I do?' , so I kiss her back but I don't try anything because she seems nervous, even though she started it."

A tavern girl passed by the table, filling the mug as she went. Eret lifted it almost subconsciously and drank again.

"And then she leaves, and four months later, we go back to Camant. I ask around at the docks for a redhead called Allayne, and all I get is snickers and eventually someone says to try above the bakery. And the rest...well, you know the rest."

Astrid snorted. "So once you knew she was for sale you figured why not?"

He shook his head. "No. I asked her back to the ship. I wanted to rescue her, or some bullshit like that, but she wasn't having any of it, and we started fighting, and it turns out I met her on

the first night she worked the docks, and she was looking for fast money. She'd made me as an easy mark but I was too stupid to even think that was why she was there."

He took another drink, and his eyes darkened. "She was seventeen."

Somewhere in her alcohol muddled mind, Astrid managed to feel sorry for him.

"Anyway, I wanted to take her away from everything because I couldn't even comprehend that she made her own decisions, and we started arguing, and next thing I knew she was kissing me again and I never wanted to leave. We ended up in some seedy tavern on the dock, and I half expected her to leave with my purse, but she stayed. Took a lot out of me, that woman did. Took a lot."

His hand moved automatically to the left side of his chest, resting over his heart.

"I got her away, in the end, but it hardly lasted six months before they found us and dragged her back by the hair. She managed to keep Eret a secret and I took him onto the ship."

"You're a fool," Astrid said bluntly. "Both of you. Fools to have ended up with the child."

"Funny thing about love," he said, taking one last drink, "is that it makes fools of us all."

Astrid hadn't agreed with him then, but she was coming around to the opinion as Stormfly landed on deck when they were half a day out to sea and raised her wings in surrender. Eret did a half decent job of feigning surprise, before chaining her to the deck with a broken leg brace that she'd have no trouble snapping if needed.

Astrid had to sweep the younger Eret below deck, insisting he was sick, when he wouldn't stop laughing at Stormfly's bobbing head and his father's faked astonishment.

The rotating shifts of the ship meant Astrid was never idle, even in the middle of the night - when she could sleep, she did so above deck, as close to Stormfly as she could be without attracting attention, with her axe across her lap and one eye open. It almost took two weeks for her to realise that the schedule Eret set had left him awake whenever she was asleep, usually working nearby, and although she never mentioned it, she slept far better for it. But even the sleep she did get was poor and full of salt, and she soon came to envy the child who could pass from task to task to sleeping below deck, almost like an interested pet. The crew treated him well, and were surprisingly soft with the boy, the little Eret son of Eret. He clearly had his favourites, and sought them out, and Astrid quickly became one of them. The work was tough, and demanding, but she buried herself in learning as much as possible about the workings of the ship, and its interaction with the others, and how the fleet functioned. She kept her head down and her ears clear and noted every details she could.

The plan had seemed simple enough, back when it was just words traded over whiskey between kisses, but as the long months of separation felt longer, Hiccup couldn't help fearing for her. She hadn't so much volunteered as made it painfully obvious that his plan to join Drago's army to get close enough to the warlord to strike a killing blow was woefully stupid.

"He knows who you are," she'd said incredulously. "He'll recognise you and have you killed within minutes."

"Well then who else can do it?!" He'd retorted sharply, growing more and more frustrated with her nitpicking.

"Me!"

The more he'd thought about it, the more sense it had made. Drago didn't know her - the only people to have seen her rescuing him were all dead. Her touch with wild dragons could pass for trappers skills, and Stormfly could travel with her under the guise of capture. Any fear he had for her safety would be promptly dealt with by the sharp side of her axe. And being a part of Drago's camp, she could provide far better information than Allayne or even Eret ever could.

"What if something goes wrong?"

She'd shrugged, already sold on the idea. "I'll tie a scarf to the mast, and you can keep close enough in sight to help."

"You don't have a scarf."

"Then buy me one! Loki's teeth, do I have to explain everything?"

Hiccup had somehow found enough clothes to get to the market in Camant the next morning, and had found a bright blue scarf with yellow tassels. She'd rolled her eyes when he'd announced he had gotten her a gift, a token of his love to match her eyes and hair and her dragon. She made him wear it for the next two days as punishment for being a sap, laughing whenever she caught his eye. Once he saw how much the corners of her eyes crinkled and her nose scrunched up as she laughed, he made a point of wearing it too, even if it was the only thing he was wearing.

When she'd added it to her outfit as she prepared for war, she'd brought it up to her face and inhaled deeply, before catching his eye and kissing him like she was drowning.

His own side of preparations felt woefully inadequate, knowing how much she was risking. While she spent every waking moment looking for weaknesses in Drago's defences and strategies, he and Toothless scoured the islands and archipelagos for dragons. It wasn't even a particularly difficult task - he'd already encountered most of them over the past five years, and any he hadn't were quick to learn.

He needed dragons who could follow orders. Dragons who could work strategy, and diversion, and knew when to use stealth.

Unfortunately, the best way of teaching them that was to rain down destruction on Berk.

It almost felt cruel, knowing what was coming and attacking anyway. He started to focus his attacks on smaller, less destructive targets - the dragons made short work of the cabbage fields up on the hills before he tested them stealing sheep and returning them to the other side of the island. It almost became a game - taking the sheep from one pen, and leaving it to be found in another. He had them destroy the Jorgenson house again, remembering Astrid's furious eyes when she'd laid beside him and finally told him the full details of her sacrifice, and moved enough sheep into the Thorston pens to be helpful without being noticeable.

He built the dragons' trust and strength and let them take their leave as they wished, although few did. It was as if they could sense what was coming, the alpha in their midst, and understood that as strange as he was, this man could help them fight it.

Toothless became as much their leader as Hiccup - snarling and grunting and launching attacks with a sharp burst of blue flame. Night Furies were as rare to dragons as they were to humans, and most looked at him in quiet respect and admiration, even before they joined Hiccup's growing force. It felt reassuring, to finally have the army and support they had needed all these years. They finally had a chance to fly properly together again too, learning the intricacies of the new rig, although both found only a fraction of the joy they used to experience in chasing Nadders through the clouds.

He kept the ships in sight, at a distance, watching for a flash of blue on the masts.

He could see her, from time to time, and that was the worst kind of torture - to see a spark of gold hair or the glint of an axe, moving between ships on gangplanks and slowly integrating herself into the army, and knowing that if anything went wrong, he would almost certainly be too late.

He trained through the day, pushing Toothless to his limits and building their forces. At night, he couldn't sleep for fear for Astrid, alone on a ship full of barbarians, with only her axe and potentially traitorous ally on her side. His thoughts would then always run to how well she could handle herself, and the fact that he had nothing to truly fear, and then he would realise how much he missed her. Then he'd try to ease the ache she left behind and found that his own hands didn't cut it after knowing the feel of hers running all over him. Instead, he was stuck staring at the deep scar of her teeth on his shoulder, and hoping she'd come to him in sleep.

He couldn't know that on the deck of a ship on the other side of the archipelagos, she was sighing in frustration and pulling a blanket tight around her. It seemed bizarre that after twenty years, it took so little time for sleeping alone to seem cold and distant.

He went north, seeking the great ice caves he'd spent a few happy months in with his mother before Drago had destroyed everything he finally had. The blood on the ice had finally melted away, but still stained some spikes with rusted brown.

The Bewilderbeast had been butchered by Drago's men, but had been far too large to be completely dismembered. The flesh had decayed over the past two years, leaving behind massive bones and half hollowed tusks.

Toothless had been anxious, refusing to fly too close, until Hiccup placed a reassuring hand on one side of his head and spoke softly.

"I just need to take a look Bud. To know what we're up against."

He had inspected the skeleton, trying to recreate the injuries. The beast's neck had been splintered when it was gored through the throat, but without the flesh it was impossible to say what had killed it.

He passed the next month in brutal training - she passed it in careful espionage. She slowly grew closer to the sentries, bringing them ale and stories and slowly learning their shifts and movements. She kept a careful watch on Eret, the only one who could betray her, only to find he was as scared of her as she was of him. Between the two of them, they watched over his son, both playing at parents for the first proper time, and Astrid realised that the boy, for all his silence, saw more than most watchful men.

The crew came to know her - to follow her orders without question and save extra food for her and 'her boys'. They traded war stories, Astrid relying on her travels for tales, and when she asked after their tattoos they told her enthusiastically of a healer on another boat who would happily mark them for half a week's coin.

She had almost cried with relief when, after three weeks at sea, she'd started bleeding. She had never considered herself a careless person, but in the week she'd spent wrapped up in Hiccup it hadn't even occurred to her that there might be some risk to their almost constant pleasure. She knew her own cycle - she'd been bleeding up until the day Rhea had announced her trip to France - but she couldn't say she'd ever bothered to follow it. Despite the relief, it had been the most frustrating bleed of her life aboard the ship with no fresh water to wash and only piles of half clean rags. Eret had been unexpectedly useful, looking almost as relieved as she had been when she asked him where the rags were. She supposed he had first hand experience in the terror at the lack of bleeding. But for all the relief of her first bleed aboard the ship, she felt only frustration at her second and third.

The moon was almost full for the third time when she finally got access to the main ship, by following behind Eret for a war council and drawing as little attention to herself as possible. She was in a foul mood to begin with - she'd only stopped bleeding two days before, and had celebrated with possibly the worst decision of her life. Her back stung but her eyes remained sharp, taking in every detail she could make out from casual, disinterested glances. The deck had been cleared of its dome shaped traps to make room for the crowd of trappers and captains, but smaller, more vicious looking traps still adorned every railing and mast. She shivered, noticing one with sharp teeth that looked eerily familiar, and joined the back of the crowd, incongruous. And after almost three months in his army, she finally got her first glimpse of Drago.

Her first impression was that he was huge. Then she realised that that was because she was relatively small, and her perspective changed.

His skin was dark - darker than Eret's, almost ashy - and his face was marked with scars. He wore a cloak of dragon skin and spoke softly in a voice that was more terrifying in a whisper than a shout.

But for the most part, he remained silent.

He stood by the edge of the ship, looking out over the roiling bubbles on the surface of the sea where Astrid now knew the Bewilderbeast was chained. He didn't contribute to discussions of food rations, or weapons allocation, or strategy. The meeting was led for the most part by two of the four generals - Posen and Roth. The other two were nowhere to be seen, most likely in yet another of the power struggles she had heard all about from a frustrated bodyguard with a penchant for dice.

It was only when the subject of dragon riders was brought up and stopped Astrid's heart that Drago so much as turned.

"He's been spotted to the east," General Posen said curtly, pointing towards the archipelagos on a map etched into the wood of the deck. "Or at least, one like him has. I don't know how he could be back in the air, but he's travelling fast and alone."

For the first time in the meeting, Drago spoke. "He is no risk. He controls one Dragon."

"He's been seen with a group - a growing force. He's not alone anymore."

Drago laughed, short and sharp, and it sent a splinter of ice down Astrid's spine. "They cannot resist the Alpha. If he is not alone now, he soon will be."

Posen cowered slightly, but spoke anyway. "And what of the dragon he's bonded to?"

Astrid's breath caught, and Eret quietly stamped on her toes.

Drago paused, then smiled. "Let him have it."

* * *

><p>"You were right."<p>

She had hardly landed when she was sliding off Stormfly's back and launching herself into his arms.

Hiccup's heart had stopped at the sight of a blue flash atop the doubled mast that evening. He'd shot the cove, their agreed meeting place in case of emergency, not wanting to miss a second with her. His blood had rushed at the idea that, after three months of distance and long, lonely nights, he would have her back in the flesh.

Fear overrode the excitement, of course. She wouldn't have signalled him if there wasn't major news, and for the past five years, no major news had truly been good news.

She was late, arriving almost two hours after him, giving him time to wash and shave and trim his nails and wash again before pacing the entire cove again and again wearing just his pants and foot. She must have used it as a stop over point, he realised, all those months ago when she was searching for a mechanist - the furs of the bed had been folded, and the rotten food cleared, and by the edge of the lake he found a dusting of gold hair which she must have cut herself, using the water as a mirror.

She was everywhere.

And as Stormfly finally landed, he couldn't stop himself rushing to the dragon's side, hardly believing she was real. She was, definitely, and her feet had barely touched the ground before she was wrapping her arms around his shoulders and shoving her mouth against his.

The kiss was sharp and messy and sloppy and he never wanted it to end. She nipped at his bottom lip and her retaliated by running his tongue over her teeth and then past them, stroking against hers. At some point the urgency shifted from relieved to passionate, as he sucked on her bottom lip and she tangled her hands in his hair, letting out a soft moan. He somehow managed to hold them steady as she hooked a leg up around his waist and ground into him, seeking and finally feeling the rigid heat she'd never known she would miss.

He groaned and they finally broke apart, still leaning close enough to breathe the same air.

"I missed you," he whimpered, burying his nose in her hair and inhaling deeply. She smelt different - sharper, salty like the sea with a tang of the wind.

"I love you," she responded simply, grinding against him again urgently. His brain, despite threatening to slip down his spine and out his shoe, managed to remember the scarf on the mast.

"Why'd you signal me?"

Remembering her purpose, she unhooked her leg and gripped his shoulders with excitement.

"Only bonded dragons can resist the Alpha."

His face crumpled, terrified. "What happened?"

"I followed Eret to a war council. They - they're moving soon, we only have a few weeks left. And... I saw Drago."

"Did he notice you?!"

She shook her head, relieved. "No, but they've noticed you. They've see you and Toothless, and your dragons, and... he's not worried."

"Why not?"

She swallowed and bit her lip. "He said no dragon can resist the Alpha. And General Posen asked what about Toothless, but he didn't say Toothless, and Drago said you could have him. Which means..."

Hiccup shook his head, stepping back. "No, Astrid - it means we have no army. Shit!" He swore and turned away, looking to Toothless. "I thought training them would be enough, but if he isn't even worried..."

She leaned down, looking into his eyes and bringing his gaze back to hers. "You know what we need to do."

They'd discussed it, when she was pulling apart his plans piece by piece. He had been reluctant - she had been downright infuriated, but in the end, it had been the only contingency they could think of.

"I'll go tomorrow," she said, looking over to the cave. "Stormfly can take me, and I won't be missed - they'll all be too drunk for the next three days. Triple booze rations before orders come in."

He grabbed her arms, suddenly, and crushed her body against his.

"I love you," he whispered, before realising she had tensed and was gritting her teeth. He pulled away, fearful.

"What's wrong?"

She let out half a laugh, trying to hide the hurt in her eyes, then walked towards the cave. She beckoned, and he followed, his mouth going dry as she reached for the hem of her shirt.

Hiccup had once sat in an icy cave, snowed in with Toothless for almost a week during a fierce storm in their first winter together, and passed the time by trying to calculate exactly how long it would take to undress Astrid Hofferson. He'd always figured it would be a long, arduous process full of buckles and bindings (oh gods, had he thought about the bindings), and the thoughts had come back unbidden as he'd met Allayne and asked for a set of women's clothes as close to Astrid's old ones as he could remember and she could find, when it had first occurred to him that Astrid probably couldn't stay in that paper thin virgin dress for long. There were less straps and buckles in the clothes Allayne eventually gave him with a cocked eyebrow, but still enough that it could hardly be a fast process. He had been wrong, as it turned out. Getting Astrid dressed, certainly, was a difficult and lengthy process. But undressing was an entirely different matter - when she wanted her clothes off, they were off. As, it seemed, they were about to be now.

But his excitement turned into horror as she pulled off her shirt to reveal a torso practically mummified with bandages.

"What did they do to you?!" He rushed over to her, arms already outstretched to hug her again, but he stopped himself when he remembered her pain. "Were you beaten? Or whipped? Or -"

His throat gummed at the horrific thought and she pressed her lips against his, soothingly. "I'm fine. If anything, it's these - they're too tight."

She gestured to the bandages, and moved his hand to the loose end, tucked under her arm, then ducked her head to avoid his gaze, and he realised that she was embarrassed and nervous. Embarrassed and nervous, he repeated to himself, not furious and full of rage. Whatever had happened to her, it had been her choice, somehow.

He untucked the end and began unwinding the bandages, blood rushing at the mere thought of the expanse of creamy flesh he was slowly revealing. Injured, he reminded himself sharply, she was injured, and he had no right to get so goddamn excited when she was hurt and probably relying on him medicinally. The growing tightness in his pants ignored the reminder, and it didn't help when she turned so he was facing her back, passing his hands around her, torturously close to her breasts.

"It's... I hope it's okay."

Nervous and embarrassed. She hadn't been like that since her half-successful seduction in that very cave.

He'd almost completely unwrapped them before her flesh became visible, and he stopped.

"I'd um... I'd get rid of them, but I can't."

He paused, then continued unwinding the bandages with urgency, until she stood bare, smooth back just inches from his front. She could feel his breath against the back of her neck, fingers ghosting over her flesh. Where there had once been smooth flesh and a neat scar from one shoulder to the other, there was now a twisting canvas of bluish-black tattoos.

Some he recognised - the outline of a Deadly Nadder, wings spread in flight across her shoulders, an axe below her right shoulder blade, a twisting pattern she had drawn on her own skin in ash. Others he didn't - ritual symbols and a Southern ship. One caught his attention - right between her shoulder blades, a small line of runes spelling out his own name.

She waited in silence as he stared at her, unable to read his expression. It was only when his hands closed against waist and he pulled her flush against him and closed his lips around her neck that she sighed and relaxed into him.

"Do... do you like them?"

He pressed his hips against the curve of her ass, and let her know exactly how much he did.

"Good," she managed to gasp. "I'm keeping them."

She tried to turn in his embrace, but he held her tight, trapped with her back to him, as he kissed his way across her shoulders and pushed down her skirt and leggings, before bringing a hand up to caress the skin of her breasts. The other hand stayed on the curve of her hip and pulled her tighter against him, grinding against her. She tried to turn again, but he tightened his grip on her hip and pinched down on her breast. She let out a moan, part arousal, part frustration.

Since their first fateful encounter in this very cave, Astrid had become interested in a lot of things she never thought she'd endure. Kissing, for one thing, had so long been linked with violence that to let Hiccup just kiss her without consequence had been a huge step. She'd always kissed who she liked, of course, it just turned out the only person worthy of that honour had been equally willing and almost painfully eager. Sex itself had been a surprise - she had been so certain for so many years she would be a shield maiden, and had so quickly been turned into a clean and fresh body to be sacrificed and used that she had never had time to consider that sex might not only be something she would someday do willingly, but demand and enjoy. In the brief honeymoon period after her confessions of love and their consummation, the week where they'd made use of every surface in and around Rhea's shed, she had discovered she enjoyed a lot of things she had always considered disgusting or demeaning. The first time he put his mouth on her, she had almost dislocated his jaw with her uncontrollable thrusting and grinding, and had come disturbingly fast all over his face - he had locked eyes with her as soon as she could see straight again, and the sight of him licking his lips afterwards had almost set her off again. The first time she had dropped to her knees, not entirely certain what she was doing or why, she had looked up to him for guidance and found his eyes rolled back at the mere thought of what she was doing. She liked that control, she had decided as she first slid him past her lips, watching his face. The old women who had disdainfully described the action to her during her baths had suggested it as a way to get a husband over with quickly during her bleed - something to be endured, again, entirely for the man's sake, proving his dominance. As her eyes flicked up and met his, almost black, she had to disagree - he was entirely under her control, and she loved it.

The one thing she had always refused was from behind. Not so much refused as redirected - every time he spooned her, intentionally or otherwise, she found some reason to twist in his arms and meet his eyes before continuing. It was demeaning, no matter what way she thought about it. She was a person, she reasoned - she would not be reduced to a nameless back and open warmth surrounded by round cheeks. She would be Astrid, and he would be Hiccup, and she would hold his gaze as he came undone with her, regardless of the circumstance.

This time though, he wasn't letting her turn. And she was almost desperate enough to take it - she could feel him hard and hot against her, and it was entirely her doing.

"I'll need a new one," he muttered against her ear before biting down lightly on the shell. "To match yours." He ground gently, throbbing against her, and they moaned together. It had been too long. He let go of her hip long enough to push down his pants before he rested the free hand on her shoulder, pushing her towards the pallet.

"Hiccup, what are you--"

He bit down on her neck, just behind her ear. Her objections garbled, becoming sharp breaths as he

sucked on the abused flesh. She hardly noticed him bending her over the bed until the furs brushed against her hipbones and nipples.

He straightened, and his hands slid down her back - she hissed, but it wasn't in pain.

"I... I want to see them," he breathed, lightly tracing the patterns of her back. "Is that... is that okay?"

There was a breathless, worshipful quality to his voice that she hadn't heard in so long, and she trusted him entirely and wanted him more than anything.

"Yes."

She could feel his length pressed up against her where she folded over the bed, but he took the time to kiss and lick down the still sensitive flesh of her back, teasingly running his fingers against her and grinning into her skin as she squirmed. He leant over her and moved his hands away, still pressing firmly without sliding in.

"They match," he breathed, still worshipping her. "Front to back."

She could feel the entirety of him through her skin, and boldly reached back to grab his hip and pull him in towards her. "Just... go," she managed to choke out.

He cried out as he sunk into her, as hard and tight as their first time without the discomfort, finally home after months apart. When she thought she was full, she breathed a sigh, only to have him bury himself further than ever before, ripping a cry from her throat.

"Is that... is it ok?"

He was retreating when she reached back and grabbed the swell of his ass, heaving him into her. She arched against the furs as his hips snapped and thrust even further, and a deep moan filled the cave, although neither knew if they had been the one to utter it.

"Fuck, Hiccup... fuck!"

He ran a hand down the curve of her spine, massaging the flesh and carefully sliding back into her, only for Astrid to shove her hips back and practically spear herself on him. She let out a sharp, breathy moan and any blood he had in his brain drained south with his self control, and he pulled back only to thrust into her savagely. The angle was indescribable, deep and fervent and stroking something deep within her, striking lightning up her spine and through her fingertips. After so long apart, to be some completely together felt like bliss, and she could feel herself racing towards a cliff of pleasure as he grunted above her and moved one hand forward to knead almost viciously at her breast.

Just as she could feel the cord within her pulling tight and threatening to snap, he lost his grip on her hip and stumbled forward on unsteady legs. He fell, pressing her into the pallet and pushing past something within her that sent her screaming and laughing and tearing into complete bliss. He was still jolting into her when she came back to her senses, lying over her and driving in regardless, and it was her disbelieving moan that sent him spilling into her with a shout of her name.

They had laid there, tattoos pressed together, long after their breaths returned. Slowly, his hands came up to stroke along her arms, then sides, then he rose to let her lie properly across the furs and sat back over her ass to slide his hands all over her. She laid there, boneless, as he followed each mark along her skin with first his fingers, then his lips.

"Are they trained?" She finally asked, feeling like his touch had planted glowing coals beneath her skin.

"As well as they can be," he said, digging his thumbs into the dimples along the back of her hips. "Will the men take your orders?"

"I should have been born heir," she said luxuriously into the furs. "I would have made a much better chief than the boy who was."

He smiled warmly, basking in the glow of what they had. "Yeah, I hear he's an idiot. Ran away, left his home, fell in love with the toughest warrior in the Midguard and swept her off her feet—"

"Swept off is right - right off the cliffs where she was waiting to be raped and killed."

He shrugged. "All the more reason for him to show up and sweep her."

"Toughest warrior in Midguard wouldn't have taken that well."

"Hmm, she didn't. In fact, if you can keep a secret," he moved up to whisper against the shell of her ear, "I think I've fallen for her anyway."

She trembled slightly, and tried to hide the shudder as bristling. "Well, good luck. I hear some idiot dragon rider decided to mess with her and ended up with one leg."

"What did he do to end up with one leg?"

"He tried to end a war alone."

"Bet he felt like a fool for that."

"Good thing he's not alone now."

She turned onto her side, making him shift too. He drew her into his arms and ran a hand protectively over her shoulder.

"I don't want you to go alone."

"I won't be. I'll have Stormfly."

He frowned. "She'll have to leave you though. Sure, she can stay in the woods but what if they try to, I don't know, spill your guts and read the entrails like runes to try and guess who I am?"

"Then I'll have to read their entrails myself," she said determinedly. He rolled his eyes.

"Of course, m'lady. Forgive me."

She leaned in to kiss him, soft and sensuous and long, gently stroking her tongue against his. It felt good, lying together totally spent, kissing like they could stay wrapped together for the rest of time.

She eventually pulled away to run a thumb gently along his lips, back and forth, over and over. He let her, holding her intense gaze until she looked away, blushing.

"So, over the heart?" he asked, looking down at his chest. There was just enough space to fit her name in runes, although on close inspection she'd discovered a tiny axe by his shoulder that had no other explanation.

She kept her gaze lowered, then leaned over him to reach for the pile of tangled and discarded clothing. He tried to hide his disappointment, before she folded back over him, the long bandage in hand.

"Give me your hand," she said, and he did, twining his fingers with hers, the end of the bandage between their palms. Using her other hand, she began to wrap it around their clasped hands, binding them together. Her heart fluttered in her chest, and she hoped desperately that this was the right thing to do.

"I don't know the words," she apologised, when their hands were buried under the off-white cloth. "And frankly you probably should have done this before anything else but..." she trailed off, looking pointedly at their bound hands.

He said nothing, knowing exactly what she meant but wanting to hear her to say it.

"This is as close as we'll get, I think," she finally blurted out. "Tomorrow... it might not work, and none of this is guaranteed, and three months was long enough to realise that I know I love you but I don't think I say it when you're not fucking me senseless or about to die, so I wanted to say it after one and before the other, and..."

She cut herself off, pressing her lips against his urgently. The bound hands came close, resting between them.

It should have been different. He should have stayed and faced the Nightmare and told Berk the truth of dragons five years ago. She should have followed him that night and beaten the truth out

of him. Then someday, they could have had this _handsal _in front of half a dozen witnesses, then been bound together in some big, auspicious ceremony that neither of them wanted.

"I love you," she breathed against his lips, resting their bound hands against her heart. "I love you," she repeated between fevered kisses and breathy moans. "I love you," she cried as she rode him towards ecstasy, hands still bound and pressed securely against his chest, feeling the thump of his heartbeat through his chest and his shaft buried deep within her.

"Wife," he had breathed in disbelief as she brought the hands to her lips, then pressed them down to his.

They were still bound when they woke the next morning before dawn. He pressed searing kisses to her face and neck and she dragged him around the cave, looking for the dress she'd left behind, finally untangling their fingers when it proved impossible to dress while still bound. He suggested they never did, and she banished him to get water and wash. Toothless and Stormfly were roused from sleep by their riders' giggles and teasing, shook their heads and stretched their wings, none too impressed with their humans' stalling.

"At least take a fur," he said upon seeing her, tall and proud and painfully cold in a dress which didn't suit her in terms of character or virginity. He took one from the bed and wrapped it around her shoulders, quietly revelling in the knowledge of what that fur had seen.

"I'll be back by nightfall," she said, kissing him soundly.

"You better be," he teased, trying to ignore the grave nature of her mission. "I wouldn't want my wife knowing about this."

She smirked. "It's okay. My husband's an idiot."

22. Like Father

The sun was sitting low on the horizon, kissing the water's edge, before Stoick the Vast entered the Kill Ring.

Astrid had almost given up hope. She'd bit her nails down to their beds and pulled at her own hair as the sun dropped lower and lower, trying to think of a plan, any plan, to get Stoick or Snoutlout or anyone of some power to listen to her. Snoutlout was out - his jaw was dappled purple where she'd smacked a fist into it. That had probably been a bad decision, but it had felt more than satisfying at the time. Whatever help Ruff had offered, it had come to nothing.

He entered slowly - he had walked stiffly ever since a Nightmare he was strangling had used its final breath to flame up and left streaky burns over the chief's knees and calves. He had only made it worse by refusing the bed rest prescribed to him, soiling his bandages with blood and ash in every subsequent raid. Despite that, he was still a commanding presence. The lazy guards at her cage door stood in respect at the sight of him, and even Astrid felt a pull at her knees and found herself standing, head bowed.

"Who is he?"

She flicked her eyes to the guards, and Stoick understood.

"Guard the entry. She can't get out any other way."

One moved instantly - the other shifted awkwardly. "She promised the beast would be back for her at sunset."

Stoick fixed him with a withering glare. "I can handle a girl and her song bird. Leave."

They scattered away, leaving the chief and Astrid, cage door between them.

"Who is he?"

She shook her head. "You wouldn't believe me."

Stoick didn't move. "I have seen a man control dragons once before - and I alone escaped him. Is he Drago Bludvist?"

She stiffened. "You knew him?"

"So it is him?"

She shook her head, almost laughing. "You've seen the Dragon Rider, even at a distance. You know it isn't Drago."

"But it's one of his men?"

"No! He... he wants Drago dead, just as you do."

"And how do you know Drago is still alive?"

She sighed. "I'm in his army."

Stoick's expression darkened and shifted to the sword at his side. It was ceremonial, she knew, but the chief had decapitated dragons with his bare hands as a child. A blunt sword could still kill her in a single blow.

"Have you lead that devil to our lands?"

She shook her head. "He's come of his own accord. He wants to conquer and prove his strength, and he'll do it by destroying every Viking he sets eyes on."

"And you told him to start here?"

She scowled and scoffed. "Do you really think I'm that brutal? That I'd destroy my own home and family?"

Stoick's hand stayed by his sword. "There was no stopping Spitelout once the village were behind him. His son is my heir Astrid. I needed to keep the village united, and if that..." He trailed off, and she could hear the bitter regret in his tone. "You were..."

"Necessary. I was necessary. My rape and murder, on a brutal man's hunch, was necessary."

"So why wouldn't you bring an army back to Berk? You deserve revenge."

She had once seen Stoick interrogate a Beserker, the last survivor of an attempted raid on Berk during her sixteenth summer. She had expected him to use sharp steel and blows to beat information from the traitor, but instead he'd simply spoken in a level voice, sympathising with the soldier until he confessed every secret he knew of his tribe. Stoick had promised empathy, a new start on Berk, in exchange for the soldier's knowledge - and once he had no more to say, Stoick had left the prison, and left the prisoner to Snoutlout and two Hooligan men who'd been injured in the raid. She had left shortly afterwards, her taste for blood sickened by the sound of crunching bone.

She knew Stoick was trying the same on her now - to offer an understanding ear, stoking her own pride until she spoke her secrets. She didn't want to think of what would happen if she did.

"It's part of his strategy. The Rider, not Drago. He - we planned this. I'm close enough to Drago to kill him with my bare hands, but that won't end his army, or his fleet. We need soldiers. We need Berk."

"We cannot side with one madman and his dragons against another."

A million explanations threatening to spill from her tongue, held back by the knowledge that he wouldn't believe her. Instead, she changed tact.

"Why would you want to know who he is?"

Stoick's eyes narrowed. "An enemy is an enemy, but a man doesn't get to be like that without starting somewhere."

"Would you speak with him if I told you?"

Stoick shook his head heavily. "Men who kill without reason cannot be reasoned with, Astrid. I don't know what he's done to you, but whatever it is..."

"How many have died?"

"At the hands of dragons? Over three hundred years? Thousands!"

"Over the past year and half. Since the Dragon Rider arrived, how many have died in the raids?"

Stoick moved to speak, then paused. She jumped on his hesitation.

"The destruction was greater, but no one died. The sheep were left alone, the harvest grew and Berk has prospered under the 'tyranny' of that man. He has never killed, not on Berk, not elsewhere. Not without reason, and not with it. He can be reasoned with, Stoick."

He stood in silence, appraising her - the fire she had not lost, the defiant glint in her eyes.

"What did he do to change you?"

"He showed me that there was another side. Then let me decide where I stood."

There was a moment of silence, a pregnant pause, before she threw caution to the wind and spoke.

"He knows what happened to Valka."

Stoick stiffened. "My wife is dead. So is my son. They died at the claws and teeth of dragons."

"And so did my grandfather, and my uncle, and every dragon they ever killed. And one day, maybe so will I. But while I have strength and breath in my body, I won't let the same fate befall my children."

"And whose children would they be, Astrid? The devil himself?"

"My husband's."

Stoick frowned. "Our people may have tied you to those posts, but they didn't tie you to him. Whatever he's done, we can help you - just tell me-"

She laughed and shook her head. "Those words don't work on someone who's seen what they lead to. Will you bring Snoutlout in once I've told you ever secret I have, so you can leave and wash your hands of this? How many times can you leave me to be raped and beaten and pretend you had nothing to do with it?"

Stoick stiffened. "Don't test my patience girl."

She laughed again, the sound clear and reverberating around her tiny cell. "And you say dragons are vicious."

She heard a cry from the guards and the children gathered at the edge of the ring, and didn't need to look to know what they saw. A blue Nadder, with shining scales and sharp spines. Stoick looked to the guards, then back to her. She nodded grimly.

"There's no stopping her. You'd best move if you value your skin."

She shoved at the cage door, and it broke on its rusted and weakened hinges. Stoick barely had time to react before the chains over the Kill Ring had melted in a stream of white-hot fire and Astrid had run past him to where the Nadder landed.

He wasn't letting her go so easily though.

He charged forward and manage to clasp a hand around her arm as she swung onto the beast's back. The dragon snapped, and she rested a hand reassuringly on its neck automatically.

"Bloodstone Island," she said, knowing only he could hear. "Tonight. Alone. You want to know who he is? You can try to kill him if you want, but at least meet him. You might rethink the killing plan after that."

Her hand on the dragon's neck closed into a fist, and it threw out its wings and knocked the chief off his feet and took to the sky.

* * *

><p>She didn't land in the cove - she hovered until Hiccup and Toothless joined her in the air and followed her to the east.<p>

Bloodstone Island was barely more than a sandpile, perched just above the sea level with a smooth beach a hundred paces wide and nothing else. She flew around it for almost an hour, refusing to land until she spied a small boat on the horizon and dropped to the sand.

He didn't question her, as always.

She climbed off Stormfly and wandered over to Toothless to unhook her axe from his saddle and pull away a bundle of her own clothes.

"Are you okay?"

He wanted to kiss her, but felt it was inappropriate. Something was weighing heavily on her mind, and he was willing to wait until she spoke. She pulled off the dress shamelessly in front of him and passed him her bindings, standing still as he wrapped them around her and helped her dress in her practical clothes, silently regretting that he would probably never see her in the virgin dress again. When he finished and secured the fur back around her shoulders, he pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek, along the seam of her scar, and stepped back.

She didn't move, so he scratched Toothless' chin as he waited for her. She came beside him slowly, still lost in thought, and scratched with him until she hit the sweet spot that sent Toothless boneless into the ground, then did the same to Stormfly.

"We need him to trust us," she said finally, stroking her dragon's horn affectionately with a hint of hurt.

"Who?"

She reached out to straighten his collar, and smoothed his hair, before twisting a tiny plait in the longer hairs at the nape of his neck.

"Someday I'm going to do that to you," he muttered teasingly, but her smile was thin.

"It's for the best," she whispered, then pressed her lips softly to his. "Don't hate me."

He had seen the boat from the air but hadn't thought about it again since they'd landed. It caught his eyes over her shoulder - a small skiff, headed towards the low beach. Two men sat in it, tall and broad. Vikings.

He looked over at her, and his face dropped.

"Astrid..."

She dug her fingers into his shoulders and held him fast. "I had to."

"This wasn't the plan!"

She swallowed and held him tighter. "It's our best shot."

The boat touched the sand before she let go, and stepped back.

* * *

><p>Stoick recognised the bob of blonde hair from far out at sea, and knew he'd been right to come. Two dragons lay in the sand, asleep or unconscious, and there was a second person - a tall man in dark leathers - standing with Astrid, close. Astrid had found an axe somewhere, and it rested against her thigh as she held the man with something between restraint and affection. She didn't fear him, Stoick realised. Whatever he'd done to break her spirit, fearless Astrid Hofferson felt safe enough to drop her axe and, and they drew close to shore, kiss him softly.<p>

He gripped the handle of the hammer he'd brought, and knew this would end tonight.

Gobber had been uncharacteristically silent the entire trip. He had refused to let Stoick go alone, but once they were on the sea in the last boat left of the Berk fleet, he had fallen into a reverie, steering without words or sight and relying on years of memory that had sealed the seas in his mind. He stayed in the boat as Stoick clambered over the side and plunged into the knee deep surf, waiting until the waves pushed the hull into sand before climbing out to follow him.

Gobber's sight had seen far better days, to pardon the pun. Long years of staring into hot coals

and flying sparks had left him unable to discern much beyond basic details, so he focussed on the movement of what he saw, rather than the blurred shapes. He had been able to recognise Astrid across the town square by her proud stature and chin, although her walk had become wider and more loose, as if she had studied the movement of creatures rather than man in her time away. He had recognised her easily, despite the changes to her appearance, simply because he didn't see those changes - he only saw the strut of the Hofferson girl who had demanded he make her an axe at age five and had swung it every day since.

The Dragon Rider, he saw, was tall - taller than Astrid, with dark hair and pale skin. He stood proudly, but slightly on edge, as if always ready to run, and he leaned in to one side in a stance Gobber recognised for more than twenty years of walking on one real leg. When Astrid stood by him, he leaned into her, seeking affection and comfort, and she did the same. When the boat came to shore though, he stiffened and became almost accusing in his body language.

She stepped behind him, to the barely moving shapes of two dragons resting in the sand, and squinted to look over at the boat. At himself, Gobber realised. She had said to come alone, Stoick had argued when he'd insisted on accompanying the chief. Astrid should have known that Stoick alone meant Stoick with Gobber, he'd argued, because it had been true for sixteen of the twenty years she'd lived on Berk. Lately, that definition had waned.

Stoick advanced along the sand, clearing forty paces of the island's length and pulling up to his full height and fury. The Dragon Rider recoiled slightly, but stood his ground. He barely had time to duck before Stoick swung his hammer at his head, and all Hel broke loose.

Astrid darted forward, axe in hand, shoving her blade under the chief's throat - but for all her speed, she couldn't match Stoick's strength as he took the axe in one hand and threw it to the side like a toy. He grabbed the Rider's head between enormous thumb and finger, holding him steady.

"I never kill an unarmed man," he growled, squeezing his grip, "but I think I'll make an exception for you."

"Stoick!"

Gobber raced along the sand, seeing only the violence in his battle brother's movement, and grabbing his arm. Astrid took advantage of the distraction to pick up her axe and heft it up, ready to strike. Stoick scowled at her.

"After all he's done, you protect your _husband_?"

"After all your tribe did to me, can you blame me?"

There was a laugh, harsh and bitter, from the Rider, head still caught in Stoick's strangle hold. Astrid scowled at the Rider, then looked to the chief.

"Look closer, Stoick. You wanted to know who he was."

Stoick tightened his grip and glanced down, if only to escape her sharp glare. The man's face was thin, angular - he could hardly be older than Astrid, let alone the ancient and terrible rider he had imagined was beneath the mask. The man he was sure had ordered the dragons to take Valka, to rape and skin and eat, who had been unsatisfied with his fifteen years of pain and had taken his son too.

He was missing a few teeth, and as Stoick shook him, he realised the Rider was missing a leg also, below the knee. He was thin, and light, leanly muscled, and he stared back at Stoick with bitterness and... hope?

There was something familiar about him, as if Stoick had met him years ago but forgotten his name and face and now only knew that he should know him. His eyes were dark green, and with a twang he realised they were the same colour and shape as Valka's, and wore the same bitterly disappointed look she used to give him when he stayed out to drink and hunt dragons instead of caring for their son.

He wasn't afraid, Stoick realised. Despite the crushing pressure on his scalp, there was no fear. If anything, there was resignation, and...sarcasm? He managed to flick his gaze to Astrid, then back up at Stoick, almost frustrated.

"Taking even longer than she did," he said, and everything fell into place.

Stoick dropped the man and stepped back suddenly, shaking his head. Gobber held his arm tight, preventing escape, as the unchanged voice explained everything.

"Hiccup?"

It was Gobber who spoke - Gobber who couldn't see the massive change in the boy's appearance, but couldn't doubt his voice. There was no mistaking the nasal twang and frustratingly inappropriate sarcasm. The Rider had landed in a heap when Stoick dropped him and rubbed his jaw before getting up.

Stoick took another step back, then hurled a fist at his son.

Luckily, Hiccup was used to this reaction by now, swiping under the fist and standing tall. Stoick attacked again, furious, growling in anger.

"What have you done?!"

He launched himself at the Rider, Hiccup darting out of the way against but losing his balance on the sand and falling as Stoick grabbed his leg and wrenched at it. Both men scrabbled to their feet, circling each other, unarmed and dangerous.

"What have you done with my son?"

Hiccup looked around, confused. "Grown up?"

Stoick lunged again, and was nearly taken out by Astrid before Gobber grabbed her arm.

"This is not our fight lassie."

Stoick staggered back to his feet in the sand, the Dragon Rider hopping out of range again.

"What did you do to my wife?"

There was no other explanation. Some form of witchcraft, taking what he remembered and what he had loved and shoving them back into his face with a vengeance. His son was dead. The boy's mother was dead. Whoever this was had his voice, and her eyes, and rode on the back of a Dragon to taunt his every waking moment. He'd used the magic on Astrid too, turning a sharp witted warrior into a slave, and would command dragons until Berk was destroyed and everything Stoick had was ashes.

"Stoick! It's me!"

The voice was painfully familiar as the Rider grabbed the chief's shoulders and held the huge man steady, despite his smaller size.

"It's me."

Stoick stood, frozen, staring at the man with fresh eyes. His chin was scarred, just like Hiccup's had been, and his face had grown and sharpened into something painfully close to his mother's. In darkness, his hair was deep brown, but would shine red in the sun, and despite his thin build, he was almost as tall as his father.

"Your son."

Stoick looked away, to where Gobber and Astrid stood.

"It's him," Astrid said, stepping forward to take his arm. "It's Hiccup."

He looked to Gobber, who nodded slowly. "No other idiot would talk like that."

Stoick fell back into the sand, legs no longer able to support him. Hiccup knelt beside him.

"Dad?"

Stoick looked over at him, and saw Valka's fire and his own strength and a sarcastic little twerp who never knew when to shut up or give up.

"Hiccup."

* * *

><p>Words - angry, harsh, accusing, spiteful, apologetic, grieving words - covered Bloodstone Island until dawn.<p>

For the first time in her life, Astrid saw tears in the chief's eyes as Hiccup spoke of Valka - first of joy, at the news that she was alive, then of fury and grief. She saw them mirrored in Hiccup's gaze as he spoke evenly, softly, explaining that he took her body and sent her out to sea in a boat set alight by his own arrow and Toothless' fire. Astrid took his hand as his voice cracked and rested her cheek against his, blotting the tears.

Throughout all Hiccup's stories, Stoick didn't ask a single question - instead he listened, _truly listened_ to his son for possibly the first time in his life. The boy had grown into a man, softly spoken with powerful words, who knew as much pain and loss and anger as Stoick ever had.

Hiccup left nothing out, although he sped through details he thought irrelevant, passing off meeting Allayne and buying the whore's information in a sentence that sent Stoick's eyebrow's up an inch or two. His grip on Astrid's hand had tightened once he reached six months ago, explaining how he was certain she had figured him out and would find them peace. The only details he left out, she noticed, were those of their relationship - he focussed on her fury at being taken rather than her attempts to seduce him into returning her. She had shifted to lean against him when he reached his own capture, the two weeks he'd spent with a steel trap closed around his flesh and her unexpected rescue.

"I thought I was dead," he admitted softly, brushing a thumb across the back of his hand. "I figured that I'd fooled the gods into thinking I was a hero and they'd sent a Valkyrie to carry me past Odin's gate."

She had heard those exact words before, breathed against her skin as he pressed her against a wall in Rhea's shed and proved to her that his injuries were neither her fault nor a burden. She shivered at the memory and he smirked slightly, knowing what memories the words had conjured. She breathed a sigh of relief when he jumped from Allayne's news of the moving fleet to her joining Eret's crew without covering the week they'd had alone, testing and stroking the flames of their sweet new love. That was something she didn't need his father and mentor knowing.

Hiccup had reached the present, and was pointing to the ships on the horizon, before Stoick spoke under his breath, almost inaudible.

"What do you need from Berk?"

"I need people. Warriors. Willing to lose their lives if necessary to destroy Drago's fleet. And willing to put aside their differences, and ride dragons."

Stoick shook his head bitterly.

"Then we cannot help you, Hiccup. Berk cannot change, and even if it could, I doubt it would."

"She used to say that. Mom." Hiccup said, watching his father stiffen at the words.

"What was she like?"

"You tell me."

Stoick half smiled. "She was arrogant, and boar headed, and she wielded more strength with words than weapons. She... she walked like she was dancing and she used to sing you to sleep when you cried during attacks. She wasn't afraid of fire, but she feared that it would burn what she loved."

Hiccup nodded. "To me, she moved like a dragon, and she walked on wings when they flew. She... she wanted to come home, but she was terrified. She didn't know what you would do, what Berk would do, and that scared her so much she stayed away for eighteen years, and she died alone. She said people couldn't change, and would hunt those who did, just to maintain their world."

He looked at Toothless, at Astrid and Stormfly, then back to his father.

"Don't be the man she feared you were."

Stoick hung his head. "The Council--"

"Can go hang," interjected Gobber. "You're the chief, even if Spitelout parades around like a

prize cock and swings their votes and favour. Where you go, your people follow."

Stoick straightened. "I'll... I can try. If it doesn't work..."

"I'll kill Drago anyway. I'll lead a suicide mission if I have to."

"We will," Astrid corrected, squeezing his hand. He looked at her with grateful tenderness, and Stoick realised she was the reason he had stopped running. The reason he had returned, even if he was as afraid of Berk as Valka had been.

"If it doesn't work, I'm coming anyway," he said determinedly. "I want to watch that demon die."

"But Berk—"

"Snoutlout can have it. You can have it, if you survive. I want that man's blood."

He picked up his hammer and stood, tall and strong in the rising light. He was about to make towards the boat when Hiccup grabbed his arm.

"I'm sorry Dad."

Stoick remained silent, waiting for the words to fall from his tongue.

"I'm not the son you wanted me to be. And I'm not the protector I thought I was, for her, or for Berk. I don't know..."

His breath hitched, and he blinked away tears. Stoick felt his own chest tighten.

"I... I never meant to drive you away. If I could take it back, I would, but... this is where we are, and this is where fate decided to take us. We can only live the lives we have, and avenge the ones we've loved."

He held out a hand, and Hiccup clasped it with the hand that wasn't still joined to Astrid's.

"For Valka," the chief said quietly.

"For Berk, and for those to come."

Stoick raised an eyebrow. "And are there many to come?"

Hiccup frowned, confused, then followed his father's gaze to where Astrid's fingers were still threaded through his.

"No! No no no no - Astrid, I mean, I love her, I always have but there isn't - well, is there Astrid?"

He turned to his wife for help, but she just laughed and pulled him into her, kissing him shamelessly in front of her chief.

"Not yet," she said to Stoick over his son's shoulder once she had wrenched her mouth away from Hiccup's.

"Won't be long I'd wager by that," Gobber chimed in, and was glad both her hands were busy wrapped around his old apprentice and thus unavailable for beatings.

She shoved Hiccup back towards his father, smirking. Gobber stepped closer, and placed an hand on each of their shoulders. Hiccup could feel Astrid's fingers against his own, Toothless' head by his side, his father's eyes on his, and had never felt more whole and more terrified.

He blinked, and the spell was broken - Stoick hefted his hammer and made his way back towards the boat.

"I'll be missed," he said gruffly, "and I have a lot of explaining to do. Come on Gobber."

Hiccup started, then glanced down at Toothless. The dragon seemed to smirk, and looking to Astrid, she had the same look on her face.

"You know," he called out to his father, "there are much faster ways to get back to Berk."

23. Divided

The search for the Chief had begun at dawn, and ended when he landed in the town square on the back of a Night Fury.

It was enough of a statement to stun the village into silence, as the boy they had presumed dead and his father, finally alive again, had climbed off the dragon's back and called for every able bodied warrior in the tribe to gather.

The message had been undercut by Gobber falling off the back of a Nadder and throwing up, but within ten minutes they were surrounded.

"What is the meaning of this madness?!"

Spitelout shoved through the crowds, rage and disbelief in his eyes. He reached for his sword, planning to behead the dragons himself, but stopped dead when Astrid shoved the blade of her axe neatly into his throat.

"Take another step or try to harm anything in this square, and I'll cleave your head from your shoulders," she said evenly.

She needn't have been so violent. Hiccup had turned to see the commotion and his eyes caught his uncle's.

"No."

Spitelout stepped back, disbelieving.

"You're dead."

He scanned the crowd for his son, only to see Snoutlout had long since pushed to the front of the other side. He was staring, mouth open with something between shock and relief.

"No way! I knew he was all mauled!"

Tuff's yell could be heard over everything - the Thorston twins had finally arrived, Fishlegs trailing behind them. They paused as one when they broke through the crowds and Hiccup turned to see them.

"Woah, Astrid, you struck-" Ruffnut stopped dead when she saw his face.

The crowd shifted - to see the Dragon Rider so close and so human was strange enough, but to recognise the man, even if they couldn't name him, filled them with unease. They, like Stoick, knew they should know him.

Ruff turned to Astrid, who was still holding Spitelout back with her axe.

"Is that...?"

Astrid opened her mouth to speak, then stopped herself, flicking her eyes to Hiccup. He nodded, almost imperceptibly, and she nodded back.

"It's him," she declared, loud enough to be heard around the square. "It's Hiccup."

Hiccup had heard anger and fury at his name before, often from the villagers of Berk. But he had never expected such rabid shock and rage. Spitelout tried to surge the mob forwards, but Astrid held firm, daring the crowd to move with fiery eyes.

"Enough!"

Stoick's voice cut through the crowd like thunder, rumbling off houses and stone and commanding the village in a way Astrid hadn't seen since she was a girl.

"This," he said evenly, turning as he spoke to address the entire crowd, "is my son, Hiccup. He was not killed by Dragons. He is alive, and he is your heir, as sure as I am your chief."

Spitelout made to speak, but Astrid crushed her steel into his windpipe, and he kept his silence.

"There is much to be discussed. Much to be decided. But we don't have the luxury of time. My son rides a dragon because there are greater threats to Berk, to our way of life and our people, than we have ever known."

"He's one of them!"

Spitelout had found his voice. He staggered back from where Astrid held him, yelling angrily.

"He has burned our village and destroyed our crops and commanded our enemies against us!"

There was a murmur of support from the crowd. Astrid had to admit, they had a point. It had taken days and weeks to convince her Hiccup wasn't a threat, and they'd had time and solitude and a chance to discuss everything.

"I didn't destroy anything I didn't have to."

Her heart stopped when Hiccup's voice carried through the village, as commanding and firm as his father's.

"I was trying to keep Berk out of this war, but the war is coming to you."

"He took our offering and attacked again!"

Astrid felt the gaze of the entire village on her, and wanted to shrink and hide and attack all at the same time. She hadn't felt so conflicted since they'd braided her hair and tied her to the cliffs. _Their offering. _Had she lost her name? Or did they hide behind a title to distance themselves from what they'd done

"I needed a companion--"

"Is that what they're calling it now?"

A laugh rippled across the village, and Astrid tried to resist the urge to bury her axe in something. Or someone.

"He didn't take what wasn't _offered!_"

She tried to keep her voice from shaking, and looked over to Hiccup for encouragement. Against Spitelout and Stoick and Hiccup's voices, her own felt weak.

"You were willing to sacrifice your own to rid yourself of dragons. And you accuse him of crimes he didn't commit?"

She felt confidence swell in her at their silence, and stood a little taller.

"Hiccup saw a childhood friend being left for dead. He saw desperation, and barbarity, and he saw a chance to save me from it. He kept me safe, and alive - which none of you were willing to do. And he gave me the sky."

She paused, and looked past Stoick and Hiccup, to where her lover's hand hovered over his dragon's head.

"Dragons are kind, amazing creatures that can bring people together."

"Or tear them apart!"

The call came from the crowd, and though she couldn't place it, she couldn't fault it either.

"Yeah, seriously - even he's all mauled! And I mean, look at his leg. And he's like, all Dragon Rider-y!"

Astrid resisted the urge to roll her eyes at Tuffnut's unchanging attitude despite the situation.

"I did that."

A murmur shuddered through the crowd. Astrid Hofferson had always been known to be violent - swinging her axe and loving a fight - but she had never been cruel. She wouldn't maim without reason.

"And you say he didn't take what wasn't offered!"

She flushed, bitterly angry at the red which stained her cheeks, and tried to find the words to beat down the crowd while still holding Spitelout at bay. She almost cried in relief when she felt Stoick's warm, blanket like hand settle on her shoulder.

"Hiccup was taken captive by Drago Bludvist - a man who tried to kill me twenty five years ago. He... his leg was broken and destroyed in a bear trap. Astrid saved him life-"

"So she protects our enemy!"

Astrid froze. She couldn't see the face, but she knew the voice - knew it from twenty years of arguments and early morning wake-ups and lullabies in the cradle.

Her own mother had turned against her.

Astrid set her jaw, and rolled Stoick's hand off her shoulder. She would do this alone.

"You are all welcome to die. I have little love for this tribe, since it has shown no love for me. I have chosen what I love, and what I am willing to die for, and gods be good I will die for it. But you would have had me die for a chance at peace conjured by smoke and ale fumes. And yet you would turn down your own heir's offers for peace and protection for the sake of a grudge and your own stupidity!"

The crowd remained silent, hundreds of eyes trained on her, and she wanted to shrink again.

"Not the greatest show of diplomacy lass," Gobber muttered under his breath.

Astrid's arm shook slightly under the weight of her axe and hundreds of eyes, and Spitelout took the silence as a chance to speak. "This is not Hiccup. This is a conjurer, a sorcerer who wears a skin not even close to the heir we lost, and bewitched dragons, then whores, then chiefs, to bow down to his will. He is--"

Astrid hardly knew she'd been brushed aside before Stoick was looming over Spitelout.

"He is my son."

The words were low, deadly, as if daring a challenge.

"I know I have not been the chief this tribe needed," he continued, turning to address the crowd again. "I thought I had lost much, and only ever wanted revenge. And now, it turns out I had lost both more and less than I could ever have hoped."

He stepped over to Hiccup, and laid a massive hand on his shoulder. "There is a madman, headed for our lands, who would enslave every man and dragon on our soil. We have less than a week until he strikes. You may have no love for dragons, but they have less love for him. They are powerful creatures, and they will protect these lands, as they are their's too. But it will be no one's land if we cannot protect it together. My son rides a dragon, as does his companion. They have trained dragons from the north and south, but they need warriors, and riders."

Stoick turned and fixed his sight on Spitelout.

"I am asking, as your chief, for your trust. Explanations will be given, when there is time. But until then, I ask your confidence, that any able bodied warrior who wishes to defend their home join me, and my son, and the dragons, to drive Drago Bludvist from our shores."

There was silence again, the last of Stoick's words echoing off houses and bodies. The crowd shifted, looking this way and that, as if they could find their loyalty and ask it where it lay. Not a single word was spoken.

"Oh for fuck's sake, come on!"

Ruffnut broke through the crowd, dragging her brother behind her. She straightened in front of the chief, then bowed her head.

"Ruffnut Thorston, and her idiot brother, reporting for duty sir."

* * *

><p>Ruff's declaration didn't inspire the crowds Astrid had silently hoped for, but it did start something. One by one, then in small groups, people began to step forwards. First it was Fishlegs, following the twins as he'd done since he first realised Ruff was female when they were sixteen. Then some older warriors, Stoick's battle brothers, who would follow him in war if not in politics. Then some of the older women, and more of the younger men, until roughly half the tribe's forces had sided with them.<p>

"We leave for Raven's Point!" Stoick boomed over the growing sound of the crowd. The migration started, Stoick and Hiccup leading as Astrid mouthed _stragglers_ at her lover's questioning gaze and remained in the square, waiting to bring up the rear. Toothless went with him, not wanting to leave the safety of his Rider's side, while Stormfly hovered by her, trying to remember her strict instructions not to destroy anything. Astrid stroked her dragon's soft neck and crooned lightly, trying to calm the nerves felt by the creature and herself. She could feel the judgemental stares on her back, but didn't care.

She didn't know where her parents stood.

She had been almost afraid to seek them out, but had spied them towards the back of the crowd, her mother's gold hair and father's tall stature giving them away. As she spoke, she made sure her back was turned to them, unable to face them, especially once her mother spoke. Even now, she was too terrified to check who they had sided with.

"I guess we both know what it is to be locked up and left out by this lot girl," she whispered into Stormfly's scales, getting a soft chatter of agreement in reply.

She focussed on those who they'd swayed, keeping her mind off the crowds who'd stormed away in fury at the 'traitorous actions' of their chief, and saw that Ruffnut was yet to move either. Despite declaring herself first, she seemed to be leaving last, the double horns of her helmet standing out in the shifting crowd.

Astrid made to move towards her when Gobber grabbed her arm.

"I suspect we're both bringing up the rear, and I don't think you want any part of that."

The throng of people shifted, and she saw the reason why Ruffnut was still there - she was in an intense, whispered argument with Snoutlout.

"How long has that been happening?"

Gobber shrugged, as if he weren't the town gossip and didn't know the exact date.

"A couple of months. She had a rough time of it after the boat. Especially once you were gone and there was a raid two days later. Got a lot of blame, saying if you weren't right then she must have been." Gobber shot her a sly look. "Seems like you were right though. That boy's carried a torch for you since he could walk."

She smiled despite herself, just able to make out the top of Hiccup's head as he led the crowd away. When she looked back to the square, Ruffnut and Snoutlout were nowhere to be seen.

"Taken it somewhere else I suspect," Gobber noted, pulling at her arm. "Let's go. I want to get one of these terrible beasties before all the good ones are gone."

She arrived at Raven's Point in time to see Hiccup clicking his foot into Toothless' rig before the two of them disappeared over the edge of the cliffs. Stormfly hovered by Astrid, drawing all sorts of glances as Stoick assured the gathered crowds that the dragons were trained and were part of a complex plan to cripple Drago's forces and bring peace. Astrid couldn't help thinking of the crew on Eret's ship, who despite everything had been something close to kind to her, and she shivered at the idea of them drowning or ripped apart by dragon fire.

It had been easier to attack the enemy when they didn't have names and faces and soft spots for little Eret and horrifically offensive joke competitions.

"So, has he married you properly?"

She jumped, the question so far from her thoughts that she elbowed Gobber harshly.

"If I tell you my secrets, Gobber, the whole village will know by sundown," she said, brushing him off with a laugh to hide the racing of her heart at the memory of bound hands and searching lips.

Gobber, it seemed, had other concerns. He looked furtively to either side and lowered his voice, serious. "No, really Astrid - has he?"

She was taken aback by his whispering. "Why?"

"Because if he has, there's a chance you might be able to stay together."

She frowned, confused. "What are you talking about?"

Gobber did another careful check for eavesdroppers, and lowered his voice further. "A future chief cannot marry a spoilt woman Astrid, even if he spoiled her. So I'm asking you now, for your own sake - are you married?"

She didn't have time to answer before Hiccup and Toothless reappeared over the edge of the cliff, shooting upwards with a cloud of dragons in their wake. Her heart quickened at the sight of him, tall and lean and hair tousled by the wind, and she was about to blame the feeling on his stupid dramatic flair before she remembered that she needed no more excuses. She could just make out a glint of the green in his eyes from a distance, and the careful intensity of his gaze sent a shiver down her spine as Toothless' feet hit the ground.

The crowd shifted, craning their necks upwards and shuffling back as, one by one, the dragons slowly landed on the grass. Man and dragon shifted uncomfortably at their close proximity, both flexing muscles and claws and watching closely around them.

Hiccup swung from his saddle and landed evenly in front of the crowd.

"Don't be afraid."

He pushed through the crowd to Stoick, speaking as he moved.

"Drago controls the dragons with the Alpha - well, an Alpha, a Bewilderbeast, but it's not the only alpha, or it might be now, but-" He grabbed Stoick's wrist and pulled him over to the crowd of dragons.

"These dragons are trained - they'll follow my commands, and they respect Toothless as a leader, and there's two sides to the plan, and I'll need you for--"

Stoick dug his heels in, effectively stopping Hiccup's babbling and taking a pointed breath. Hiccup mirrored him, breathing in deeply and seeking out Astrid's face in the crowd. She smiled, strong and supportive (was he imagining it or was there a hint of lust in her expression?) and mouthed The Plan at him.

"Our strategy has two parts," he said finally, gathering his thoughts and putting a hand to Toothless to steady himself. "The army has two main leaders - Drago, who commands the men, and the Alpha, which commands the dragons. Drago controls the Alpha itself, but without it, he has no dragons. Half his army are held in fear of the dragons he commands, and most of the rest are there for coin - so if we take out Drago, and the Alpha, the threat is gone."

He paused, making sure everyone was following.

"So what's the battle plan?"

He nodded appreciatively at his father, and addressed the crowd. "The ships will be here in less than a week. In three days, we launch the attack while they're still at sea, and take out the Alpha. Once it's out of the picture, Drago is powerless. Then our people in his army will be free to take Drago prisoner--"

"Prisoner?!" called a disbelieving warrior from the crowd, and Hiccup's eyes darkened.

"Only until I'm close enough to kill him with my own hands."

That roused a cheer from the Viking horde. There was nothing Vikings loved more than some cold blooded revenge.

"You might have to fight me for the honour, son," said Stoick, looking over his shoulder at the gathered dragons.

"And how do we get on the back of these beasts in three days?" The question came from Sven Larson, who had followed Stoick into more battles than Astrid had ever seen, and whose arm had first been

taken by infection, then a prosthetic melted in place by Nadder fire. Astrid allowed herself a sliver of hope that if a man like Sven Larson had put aside his hatred and come to bond with dragons, maybe there really could be peace once Drago was dead.

Hiccup whistled sharply, and the nervous dragons stood to attention. "I've been training them for the past three months. They're fast, they're smart, and they breathe fire, which puts them three up on anything Drago can throw at us."

"Then why do you need us at all?"

Hiccup's eyes widened at the voice, combing through the crowd for its source. When he saw it, he still didn't believe it. And yet there he was, Snoutlout Jorgenson, standing with arms crossed and a look of disbelief at his own presence.

Hiccup looked him squarely in the eye, and remembered his father's words. _Explanations will be given, when there is time._

For the time being, he simply nodded slightly, and spoke to the crowd.

"The Alpha can control all dragons. Except those bonded to a rider. Toothless and Stormfly have both flown against it, but lone dragons, even under a human leader, can't resist the Alpha's call. If I were to fly in commanding a dragon army, I would lose it within seconds. With a dragon riding army though..."

He looked back at the gathered dragons, then slowly beckoned one - a twitchy Nightmare, its eyes flicking from one sight to the next, unused to being on Berk soil without being alight and angry.

"Snoutlout," he called evenly over his shoulder, holding a hand out to the Nightmare.

But it seemed that the hearts and minds of dragons could be won far more easily than those of men. Snoutlout might have been willing to throw caution to the wind and join them on the cliffs, but he stayed put, refusing to move.

"He needs a rider," Hiccup continued evenly, drawing the Nightmare closer and closer, walking backwards towards his cousin. For every step he took, Snoutlout tensed further, until he seemed like a bowstring ready to snap. The crowd parted around him, making space for Hiccup and the enormous dragon, as Snoutlout remained rooted to the ground.

"It's okay," Hiccup said softly, unsure if he was speaking to the dragon or the Viking. He reached behind him, searching for Snoutlout's hand to replace his own, and found air.

Snoutlout had stepped back, into the crowd, and looked away.

"Urgh, do I have to do everything myself?"

Neither Snoutlout or Hiccup had time to think before Ruffnut had shoved Snoutlout aside and held out an open palm to Hiccup. "Is this how this works?"

Hiccup nodded, eyes wide, and guided her hand towards the Nightmare's snout. Her palm was rough, fingers long and spread, and almost imperceptibly shaking. But she stood her ground, and stretched her hand until it hovered over the Nightmare's horn.

"He has to make the final reach," Hiccup explained softly, looking from Ruff to the Nightmare. Woman and dragon held each other's gaze, unblinking.

"If you like watching the world burn, we're gonna have a great time together," she said, stretching her palm out a little further and closing her eyes.

The Nightmare closed the distance, and the bond was made.

* * *

><p>"AUGGGHHHH!"<p>

"You know, this would be a lot easier if you screamed a bit less."

Ruffnut pulled on the Nightmare's horns, trying to straighten him in the air to fly alongside Stormfly.

"That's what Hiccup said."

Astrid scrunched her face in confusion, before Ruff wiggled her eyebrows.

"Actually, I don't know if that's wiggle worthy. Or even if that's right. You were probably the one saying that to him."

Astrid looked down to the rushing ocean a thousand feet below, and wondered if it would be too much to kick Ruff off and catch her. Probably. She considered it anyway.

"I mean, I know what I'd do if that kidnapped me. What did he have to trade the gods for that ass!"

Seriously considered it.

They were hovering near the cliffs, still in sight of the rest of the Vikings and dragons gathered on the ground. Ruffnut had insisted almost as soon as the bond was made that it was about time she got to fly on one of these bastards, and Hiccup had shot a look to Astrid and Stormfly on the edge of the crowd.

"Okay," she'd said, swinging onto Stormfly's bare back and wishing she'd brought a saddle. She hadn't told Hiccup that the flight to Berk the day before had been Hel on her already aching legs - his fault entirely. She didn't want to give him the ego trip. Or maybe she just wanted to save it for when she could take full advantage of it.

"I'll be over the water," she called to Ruff as Stormfly unfurled her wings. "First step is to meet me there."

She had heard Gobber making proud comments about her taking on his 'learning on the job' approach before she was high enough in the sky to touch the clouds. She let Stormfly climb until she could see all of Berk laid out below her like a map. In the village, the town square was still crowded - between the flagstones and the grass of Raven's Point, there stood the entire village, divided neatly in two.

She tried not to think about the harsh sound of her mother's voice in the square, and her parents' total absence from the cliffs.

"Thought you said you'd be over the water!"

Ruff had to yell to be heard above the rushing wind of endless air as she banked through the clouds towards her friend. She was still yelling now, two hours later, as Astrid ran her through the finer points of basic flight and tried to ignore the twin's needling.

"If I knew that was what Hiccup would end up looking like, I'd have been a lot nicer to him when he was all sad and useless and puppydogish."

Astrid rolled her eyes. "Think about what you just said, and feel bad about yourself."

"Is that what you said after he said the screaming thing?"

Stormfly dropped down a few hundred feet without warning, towards where Sven Larson was just starting to fly on the back of a sturdy Gronkle. Astrid rubbed the Nadder's neck, knowing the dragon could read her rider's mind and smell her discomfort.

"You just need to trust him," she called to Sven, motioning encouragingly. "He knows a lot more about flight than you. It'll take a while for him to get used to having a rider though. Just hold on tight, make sure he knows you're there, but _trust him_."

There were half a dozen riders hovering close enough to the cliffs to move in if needed, and Astrid flitted between them, inevitably coming back to Ruffnut.

"So how'd he break it to you? The 'sorry, not the dreaded Dragon Rider, actually the village hiccup all grown up and sexy' thing? Did he do the whole awkward erming and ahing and the shoulder moving shit?"

Astrid was about to dismiss her, or lie, when she figured why the Hel not.

"He kissed me."

Ruff raised an eyebrow. "And?"

"And I punched him in the face."

"And?"

"And then I tried to kill him a couple of times."

"And?"

"And we both nearly got killed in a demented dragon attack but he and Toothless got me out of there."

"And?"

"How many times are you going to say that?"

"Until I get to something scandalous. Or just juicy. Possibly involving that immaculate ass. Is he still all twerpy and twiggy in the sack?"

Astrid shot down to where Gobber was just lifting off, but Ruff followed her this time, finally in control of her unruly Nightmare with one hand on its spine and the other holding her helmet.

"Cos judging by those bites of yours, he isn't."

Astrid banked back up into the clouds, not wanting Gobber to hear a word of this - once he heard a good salacious story, Gobber was harder than a greased pig to track down as he spread the word through town. They were almost above the clouds, the sun burning hot and bright on her skin, when Ruffnut burst out in uncontrollable giggles.

"What?"

It took almost a minute for her to get the words out - every time she went to speak, another wave of laughter took over. Astrid folded her arms and gave her an unimpressed look.

Finally, Ruff wiped the tears from her eyes and, in a dead pan impression of Hiccup's nasal tone, said "Oh, yes, Astrid. Yes, right there. Can I touch your tiny tits? I - oh, oh gods, oh gods!"

She squeezed her eyes shut and mimed an orgasmic groan through her nose, before popping one eye open. "Nailed it, right?"

Astrid glared. "I'm not even going to dignify that with a response."

"So he does sound like that! Nailed it! Or, you know, nailed you. Does he tell you he's coming like that?! 'Oh Astrid, no, please, I'm about to'-" She feigned choking again, squeezing the sound out her nose. "I bet he says thank you after he comes too. Every single time. Even if it's just in his pants, even if he's just thinking about your tiny little tits."

Astrid whirled around on Stormfly's back. "Are you basing these guesses on what his cousin does?"

Ruff laughed, cold and harsh. "Have you ever heard Lout say thank you? For anything? He just kinda grunts, like he's trying to push a cart full of rocks up a hill or something."

Astrid raised an eyebrow. "Hot."

Ruff shrugged. "The Southerners were better. They knew it was my first time and I got to pick which ones got to actually get it in and which ones had to just watch, so they actually put an effort into getting me started."

Astrid started slightly, then rubbed Stormfly's neck to abate any fears. Ruffnut had never spoken about what had happened on that ship. She'd been more than happy to make crude jokes at anyone and everyone's expense, including her own, but as soon as the subject of her 'disqualification' as a virgin sacrifice came up, she froze. Even when Astrid was still furious at her, she had known it was not the right topic to take lightly. She'd figured that, as composed as Ruff had been when they found her, it had been a rough, traumatic experience. She had never imagined Ruff calling the shots, deciding what was happening and when it was happening, and who it happened to.

But now, things were different. She could still remember laughing hysterically, draped across Hiccup's chest, when he suggested that fate had decided to bring them together. She had summarily

informed him that a series of idiotic and desperate decisions, from the idea of a sacrifice to her own need to cut off his leg to Ruff's decision to fuck a boatload of Southerners, had resulted in her lying naked on top of him in a shed in some Thorforsaken foreign land. He had given her a half hearted spiel about fate working in unusual ways, and she had given him a raised eyebrow before finally recounting her sacrificial procession step by step, surprised that in all their talking, they had never discussed the very situation that had brought them together.

He had kissed her and held her and apologised again and again for actions he had no influence over, and then washed her hair and made sure she knew that for all the cruelty fate had shown her, she had ended up in a far better place for it.

She couldn't say the same for Ruffnut. The tough, determined Thorston girl, thrown to the dragons and climbing out of the fire through sex and ruined reputation, left to be the concubine to a man she'd spent half her life rejecting, knowing he only thought of her as a half decent alternative to the more violent rejections that Astrid offered.

But now, sitting astride a Monsterous Nightmare in the clouds.

Maybe, just maybe, things could change.

"Anyway," Ruff said dismissively, "how do I get this thing to flame up?"

Astrid pushed six months of unknown history to the back of her mind, and focussed on the task at hand.

"Does he have a name?"

Ruffnut shrugged. "He liked Worldburner."

"Does he respond to it?"

Ruff looked down at the dragon, as it twisted its head to meet her eyes. "Worldburner! Fire!"

The Nightmare cocked its head, confused. "Fire!" Still nothing. "Flames! Come on Worldburner, let's burn some shit!"

That seemed to get the dragon interested, as it plunged back towards the island and its forests full of very flammable wood. And the village full of very flammable houses.

"Should we stop her?"

Stormfly trilled and shrugged her wings against Astrid's calves.

"Yeah. In a minute."

* * *

><p>The sky was streaked with red and gold when Hiccup felt a hand on his shoulder, and knew it was time.<p>

"I'll be missed if I'm gone any longer," Astrid said, drawing him away from Fishlegs' excited jabbering and the Gronkle that the larger man had taken an intense liking to.

He took the hand from his shoulder and held it against his cheek. "You'll be missed either way."

She smiled, contentedly, and rubbed her thumb over his skin. "Three days."

"I'll be watching," he said, looking to Toothless. "If anything goes wrong..."

"You'll see blue on the sails again."

Stormfly shifted beside them - she understood the restraints of time as well as any of them. But neither Hiccup nor Astrid moved, even though they could feel the surreptitious eyes of half the warriors on them. They only cared for each other, and the silent promises they'd made, and the risks that could tear everything they had apart.

"I love you," he whispered, kissing her palm and letting her go. "No matter what."

She used her now free hand to poke him in the stomach, right where she normally punched. "You

better," she warned. "Since I love you."

She had grown up being taught that affection should be restrained. Her own parents had rarely held her, in any circumstances, as a child - and as an adult they had used that restraint and distance to pass her off without care. Her cousins, when they were wed, had hardly known their husbands and barely shown more than fear towards them. The one time she'd seen genuine public affection, it had been between a foreign chief and his mistress, while his wife sat in the same hall, straight-backed with her eyes fixed forward. She hadn't truly believed that love existed until it decided to storm into her life and make her chest seize and her fingertips tingle whenever she laid eyes on him.

She knew it would scandalise the village, and send rumours flying. He knew too, which was probably why he waited for her to make the first move. Knowing, of course, that she would.

In the end, it was Toothless who nudged her side and sent her stumbling into him. She grabbed his hips, the nearest part of him, and heaved him into her, trying to retain some grace or dignity.

There were enough rumours flying already. Adding one would hardly tip the scales.

"C'mere you," she said, before slamming her mouth into his and shoving her tongue past his teeth in full view of everyone.

She went to pull away and grin teasingly after a few seconds, but he followed her, digging his fingers into her scalp and deepening the kiss. She went with him, smiling against his lips as his tongue stroked along hers.

"Oh put it away, you're making me pregnant!"

They broke apart at Ruffnut's harsh call, still breathing the same air. Astrid grinned smugly at the stunned silence of the gathered Vikings, then went straight back to kissing him. She'd finish when she was good and ready.

"Three days," she said, finally climbing onto Stormfly's back with kiss swollen lips after Stoick himself had cleared his throat pointedly and she'd realised the sun had almost set. "Three days, then I can keep you."

Her eyes said more. _Three days until this is over. Three days until he's dead, and Valka can rest, and Berk is safe. Three days until we have to decide what to do with messes we've made and the tribe that abandoned us. _But also, a hint of _Three days until I have you until you can't walk. _

She flew away, and he took it as a promise.

* * *

><p>"They know."<p>

She had expected to land without fanfare - to slide Stormfly's leg loosely into her chains and slip below deck and be found with her 'son' in her arms before anyone thought to look for her. The rest of the crew were likely on another boat, where the rum was better, and Eret would have retired early to write the seventeen letters he had told her he planned to write for his son in case he died and left the boy fatherless. One for each birthday, he'd explained, until he was twenty one. Each becoming more honest, more frank, as his son grew without a father, and giving the advice Eret had always wished he'd had.

She'd found the idea sweet, unexpected from a man twice her size who drew his sword too easily and could knock over every piece of pottery in a market without actually setting foot inside the potter's stall. He had asked her to deliver them to Allayne with the boy if he didn't make it. She didn't have the heart to tell him that if he died, she was unlikely to outlive him.

She had thought about doing the same for Hiccup, before she remembered that everything she could say had been said, and she didn't want to prepare for death, but fight it kicking and screaming and insisting she had years left.

She had expected the boy to be asleep, as he so often was, or sitting quietly as his father wrote, not knowing the significance of his letters. Instead, he waited for her on deck, small and silent by one of the trapping bows.

She jumped at his voice, and stared in surprise.

"You shouldn't be here Eret," she said once her heart had calmed. "You should be with your father —"

"They knew you were missing, even though you said they wouldn't."

She froze, and grabbed the boy's arm, kneeling down to his level.

"What did you say?"

"You said they wouldn't notice you were gone, to Papa. But they did, and one of the big men came and asked questions about where you went and why one of our dragons was missing."

A spear of ice shot down her spine.

"And what did Papa tell them, Eret?"

The boy looked around carefully for waiting ears. "The big man thought I was asleep. So did Papa. But I listen a lot when they think I'm sleeping."

She nodded, knowing it was true. When Allayne had introduced them, explaining to the boy that Astrid was a friend who would be pretending to be his mother, and would look after him even though she could never do as good a job as his real mama, he had said he already knew. Later, he had told her he understood their plan, and that his mother hadn't liked it but his father convinced her, and he knew she had a 'papa' of her own. She had smiled at that, and almost explained that she did have a 'papa' called Hiccup, but they didn't have a child like him, before she stopped herself, realising she had nearly foolishly spoken the truth to someone who didn't know how to guard his tongue, but could loosen those around him.

Eret, son of Eret, knew how to use his position to gather information, just as his mother and father did.

"So the man said children weren't allowed in the army. And that if Papa didn't tell him where you were, he'd take me away."

Astrid could hardly get the words out. "And what did your Papa say?"

"He said... you were having another baby, and you'd gone to the healer's boat a few days ago, and he didn't know what had happened to the dragon. And you were 'somewhere on this wretched fleet, puking your guts out and regretting that you fucked a blacksmith while he was away'."

Eret's head bobbed as he quoted verbatim, and she couldn't resist the urge to hug him.

"You shouldn't use that word," she said on reflex. "Fuck is a grown up word."

"Papa used it."

"Your father is a grown up," she retorted, finally feeling secure enough to attach Stormfly's leg chain, knowing the game wasn't up. She scratched the dragon's chin as she secured the chain, replacing the pin and not the lock, and willed her heart to slow its frantic rhythm.

"But the big man said he didn't believe Papa."

She froze again.

"And he said he'd be back every day until you were."

She turned slowly, and saw the child was telling the truth.

"Fuck!"

Eret watched as the woman pretending to be his mother ran to the mast and dug her fingers into the lattice of ropes around the sturdy wooden pole, finding purchase and scrabbling upwards. He didn't entirely understand what she was doing as she pulled off her scarf and secured it to the top of the mast, to trail in the wind.

"Eret, go to your father," she yelled from high above, climbing back down and feeling for the pendant of the dragon tooth necklace she always wore. "Tell him we're moving early. Hiccup will see this by morning, and —"

Her feet landed on the deck, and a hand closed around her neck.

She was wrenched into the air, clawing at the fingers around her throat, but she'd left her axe when she'd climbed the mast, and - shit, it was on deck, and Stormfly wasn't properly locked up, and little Eret was looking up in horror as her feet dangled in the air high above his head, kicking and spitting and swearing and knowing it was all for nothing.

The fingers around her throat tightened, and her vision was eaten away by darkness. The last words she heard was from her attacker, who leaned over her curiously as he lowered her slumped body to the ground.

"Hiccup."

24. Flesh Wounds

****WARNING:** The following chapter contains some pretty nasty stuff. Normally, I wouldn't put a warning, but it's honestly a lot worse than I would normally write. The chapter contains physical and psychological torture, harm of children and discussion of sexual assault. If you are squeamish or easily triggered, I recommend skipping Astrid's perspective in this chapter (the first, third and fifth sections).******

****These are not the sort of villains who tie their victims to railway lines with a copy of the timetable.****

* * *

<p>She woke gasping for air, freezing and afraid.<p>

The first thing she registered was the wooden floor pressed against her cheek, and the smell of whale oil and tar. She gagged, her first breath putrid, and coughed as she pulled herself into a sitting position and surveyed her prison.

She'd been there before. Not a prison, but the deck of Drago's ship.

The deck seemed smaller when it wasn't crowded with men and armoured dragons - traps lay empty along the floor, and behind her rose two of the frightening domes she'd eyed last time in fear and apprehension. She wasn't in one of them, she realised with a drop of her stomach. They hadn't imprisoned her. Yet.

"The bitch is awake."

The voice came from her left, and she realised she wasn't alone. Three men stood off to her side, one large and two huge. The smallest of them she recognised. General Posen. He was facing away from her when he spoke though, and instead staring towards the bow of the ship.

She almost didn't check. She was cold and angry and for the first time in her life truly terrified, and she hardly wanted to confirm her suspicions that she would die on this floor, alone and unmourned. But she looked, and saw him, and accepted that she would.

Drago Bludvist.

He seemed larger without the crowd, and as much as she tried to tell herself it was because she was disoriented and barely on her knees, she knew it wasn't true. He was massive, and dangerous, and when he turned to fix his eyes on her, she wanted nothing more than to disappear. The man who had trained a Bewilderbeast could bring something far more than terror to the hearts of men.

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock. The Third."

It was Posen who spoke. Drago remained silent, watching her like a predator watches harmless prey, and slowly advancing towards her. He carried a sharp bullhook and wore a cloak of dragon skin, dark and shifting, and her heart managed to find rage in the terror when she realised that the cloak could only be the skin of a Night Fury.

"Lost heir to Stoick the Vast. Presumed dead for the past five years. They said he was eaten by dragons, just as his mother was. But she wasn't, was she?"

Astrid didn't know if the question was for her or Drago. She wouldn't answer either way.

Drago stopped and considered her.

"It's her son?"

Posen nodded. "It makes sense. Boy looked like her. Screamed like her too. Didn't ask for mercy for himself, just for the dragons."

Drago pointed the spike of his bullhook at Astrid. "And this one?"

"One of his spies, it seems. She's been on our watch for a while - she wasn't the Trapper's whore, like she said she was. We thought we'd lost her, but she came back after two days. Seems she had a tame dragon."

"Had?"

Astrid tried to hide the fear in her eyes.

"It got away. We thought it was secured but the lock wasn't shut."

Posen shot a furious glare at the two men behind him, who shuffled awkwardly.

Astrid couldn't help the sigh of relief that slipped through her lips. The next thing she knew, the metal bullhook was shoved into her throat and her head wrenched upwards. Drago stared down at her, enormous and menacing, and she stared back, defiant.

"Is this right? Is the Dragon Rider the son of Valka the Treacherous?"

She kept a steady gaze, trying not to wonder how Valka had earned that name. Any emotion, any fears or confusion, would be held against her. The rusted metal of the bullhook was flat against her throat, but she didn't doubt his ability to crush her neck with one blunt blow. Drago didn't move, but neither did she. Finally, slowly, she blinked and, using the limited motion she had, spat up at him.

The spit barely made it to the wooden shaft of the bullhook, but her sentiment was clear. Drago laughed, low and terrible, and turned to Posen.

"If she will not speak, why is she still alive?"

"The Trapper said she was with child." Posen came closer to her, nervous, and Astrid realised that for all his careful words, he was almost as scared of Drago as her.

"We spoke to the healers, who knew nothing of that. But, they knew of the something else."

He pulled a knife from his belt, and though her gaze stayed strong, her breath quickened. Posen grabbed a fistful of the back of her shirt and tugged, pulling the knife through the fabric and ripping it open.

Astrid slumped forwards as the shirt came away in pieces, leaving her in her bindings with her tattoos in clear view. Posen dug the point of his knife into her back, nicking the skin between her shoulder blades.

"I think this whelping bitch is his."

Astrid tilted her gaze up, refusing to look at his boot. Drago looked down at her, and grinned sharply.

"Good," he said, before driving a foot into her stomach.

* * *

><p>The torches had been lit by dragon fire that evening.<p>

Hiccup had insisted on training through the night, until every willing dragon and warrior was bonded. With every closed eye and open palm, his breath stopped short - with each offered snout and trusting blink, it started again with a heavy sigh.

None had made him more nervous than the Rumblehorn that had sized up his father from a distance and snorted in approval, before bumping Hiccup's side and tossing his head at the chief.

"Dad."

The word still felt foreign on his tongue, after all these years. Stoick had looked away from Ruffnut's attempts at commanding her Nightmare to fly up to follow Astrid, and caught sight of the opal coloured armoured dragon.

"I haven't seen one of them in years."

Stoick paced carefully over to his son and the dragon.

"Do you like him?"

Stoick looked down at the beast, considering. The dragon looked back with the same analytical gaze. It tossed its head, then lowered its neck, as if in respect. It was only then that they saw the scars.

"Has he been captured?"

The cuts ran deep into the armoured plating around the dragon's body, dull and grey against the bright greens and reds.

Hiccup leaned over to check, and his eyes darkened. "No. Enslaved. When Drago has them armoured, the skull plate is put on before the metal has had time to cool. It sears into the skin, holds it there. It takes a lot of strength to get rid of one."

He ran a hand along the dragon's back, and although it tolerated him, its eyes were fixed on Stoick.

"Aren't they usually grey?"

"Not in the wild. But once they've been enslaved for generations..."

Stoick blinked, then nodded, once. He placed his hammer down onto the grass and looked expectantly at his son.

"I'm ready."

He reached up to rest a hand on his helmet, and Hiccup suddenly remembered Stoick gifting him a matching helmet just before his final exam.

Your mother would have wanted you to have it. It's half of her breastplate. Keeps her close.

"Hold out your palm, and offer him a name." Hiccup instructed, bringing his father's hand up and close. "And... well, I'd say look away, but Astrid says that's the opposite of what she did and it worked fine for her and Stormfly. I guess it just comes down to the dragon, or the person..."

He trailed off, and his chest tightened at the sight of his father and the dragon staring one another down, before leaning forward at the same time.

"Skullcrusher."

The dragon huffed, then knocked its head against Stoick's hand in agreement. Stoick stared into the dragon's eyes, with something close to understanding. "You're not the only one who wants him dead."

The sight of the chief of Berk astride his own dragon had been enough to bring another dozen warriors to the cliffs and the dragons. It wasn't a perfect process - more than once, the dragon refused to rise for an offered hand, and Hiccup had been forced to move to another beast, hoping desperately that it wouldn't happen again.

Off the edge of the cliffs, the small force of hovering dragons and their riders had grown. Since Astrid's dramatic and rumour inducing exit, Ruffnut had taken her place, declaring herself the greatest dragon master available. The Nightmare, Worldburner, seemed pleased enough to set itself on fire at any opportunity, and Hiccup could tell that Ruff would only encourage the habit.

By the time the torches were being lit, the sky was thick with dragons and men. All had been bonded - all, that was, save one.

"We'll find another one."

"No! The only ones left are for women or idiots."

Hiccup bristled. "Astrid has a Nadder - are you calling her an idiot?"

Snoutlout rolled his eyes. "No, I'm calling her a woman. Don't get on your high horse. Or high dragon, whatever."

Of all the volunteers, Snoutlout had been the hardest to find a match for. Hiccup couldn't help blaming his cousin for the whole thing - if he hadn't stepped away earlier, he could well have bonded with Worldburner. But that ship had well and truly sailed now, with Ruffnut and the Nightmare as thick as thieves, the Viking delighting in her dragon's abilities for destruction and sheep catching. She had disappeared with Fishleg and her brother, on their own dragons, to see Berk from the sky and possibly set Mildew's cabbage patch alight (again).

"Can't you find another Nightmare? Or Night Fury? I mean, that's a proper dragon." Snoutlout gestured at Toothless, who looked back at him in agreement. "Unholy offspring of lightening and death. Not all preeny and birdy and girly."

Hiccup gritted his teeth. "We don't have time to be picky Snoutlout. You either take a Nadder or a Gronkle or you don't fly at all."

Snoutlout scoffed. "Yeah, because it's not like you need me."

Hiccup shrugged, and raised an eyebrow. "I don't."

Snoutlout's eyes narrowed. "Yes you do."

As children, Snoutlout had once convinced Hiccup that he wasn't really Stoick's son. He'd made an entire day of it, roping in Tuffnut - who didn't quite know what he was doing - and Fishlegs - who definitely did but was too scared to object - to build a story about Hiccup being found as a baby in the yak fields, little and bony and useless. Stoick had taken him in out of pity, the story said, because he had no true son of his own. But since Snoutlout was born, Stoick had regretted not waiting another three months to adopt the perfect heir.

In retrospect, the details were sketchy. Even if it was true, how could Stoick have adopted Snoutlout? Hiccup may not have remembered his mother, but he knew he had had one, once, because every adult in the village had said how sad it was that he would grow up without her. And when he'd asked Gobber where he'd come from, he'd gotten a very brief and frankly confusing version of the birds and the bees, and had been scared of girls for the next three months.

But even after he'd asked his own father and Stoick had set Snoutlout straight with a stern talking to that had scared him out of his five year old pants, Snoutlout still insisted from time to time that Hiccup was adopted.

"No I'm not," Hiccup would insist, clumsily listing off the reasons why he wasn't. And every single time, Snoutlout would listen, and nod, and seem convinced, then insist again that Hiccup was a founding beast from the yak fields. Hours had been passed between the words "No I'm not" and "Yes you are."

Hiccup couldn't help thinking of the yak fields as Snoutlout straightened up to his full height, then slumped slightly again, before insisting "Yes you do."

However, Hiccup wasn't the boy who never stood up to Snoutlout and cried himself to sleep in fear of being a yak field reject anymore. Instead, he simply turned on his heel and walked away, to where Toothless waited by the edge of the cliff.

"Hey!"

He kept walking, running a hand along Toothless' neck before he jumped up into the saddle and clicked his foot into place.

"Hiccup!"

He looked down at Snoutlout from the saddle, and suddenly realised how small the other man was.

"If you've not interested in riding Snoutlout, go back to the village and your father. I don't know why you wanted to in the first place, and I won't question a man who puts his life in my

hands, but** I don't have time for this**."

Toothless shifted his weight back, wings unfurled and ready to fly, when Snoutlout grabbed Hiccup's arm.

"You can't pretend this will work."

Hiccup looked at him incredulously. "I'm sorry, when did you become the dragon expert?"

Snoutlout shook his head, then looked around almost furtively. They were virtually alone.

"Not your suicide plan, although that would probably solve everything."

"Well then what?"

Snoutlout stared at him like he was an idiot. "The chieftdom."

Hiccup raised an eyebrow. "Okay. Once you've got it working Lout, let me know - I'll find you a dragon then."

Toothless wriggled back, intending to fly off once again, but Snoutlout held firm.

"What happens if you survive?"

Hiccup shrugged. "I think Astrid wants to lock me up for a few months if that happens, but otherwise I don't have any plans. I'm not much of a plan ahead guy."

Snoutlout dropped his arm when he realised he was serious.

"You really haven't thought about the chieftdom?"

Hiccup gestured roughly at where the ships would arrive within days. "Honestly, I've had other things to think about. Like the army about to destroy the entire tribe and the dragons I've had to strain and the fact that Astrid has spent every hour of the past three months on one of Drago's ships, just waiting to be taken away!"

Snoutlout's eyes widened. "Is that where she went?"

Hiccup nodded, still angry. "She's risking her life, and everything between, for this. So don't give me bullshit about Nadders being too girly and you deserving a better dragon when you had a chance for one and you didn't take it." Hiccup rubbed his brow, and sighed heavily. "Gods, it's just like when we were kids."

Snoutlout was about to speak when a fireball exploded over the cliffs, followed by a shouted swear from Ruffnut. Worldburner must have tried to flame up and forgotten about his rider. Again.

Hiccup glanced out over the cliffs, then climbed off Toothless' back to look Snoutlout in the eye, pointing out towards Ruffnut.

"She is twice the Viking you'll ever be."

He was ducking beneath Snoutlout's fist before it was even thrown.

"Fuck you! You think you can just show up after five years and take everything back from me?"

He threw another punch, and Hiccup swung beneath that too, using the agility he'd gained from all those fights with Astrid over the months to sweep his false foot out and hook it around his cousin's calf. Snoutlout was on the ground before he even had time to think, and Hiccup loomed over him, grabbing his shirt front.

"I came back after five year to stop you killing dragons, and to kill the man who took my mother and my leg. And at this point, he could still take my wife. I don't want Berk - I don't want to sit on a tiny wooden throne on this piss soaked island worrying about sheep pens and fishing nets. You're welcome to it. So you can fuck off, or you can help me - just don't waste my time."

He straightened, and offered Snoutlout a hand. The darker man looked up, confused.

"Help me, or fuck off - your choice."

There was another flash of flames off the edge of the cliffs, and a victorious whoop. Worldburner's wings were aflame, Ruffnut bathed in the light of them, but his body was stable.

Snoutlout took the hand, and pulled himself to his feet.

* * *

><p>Astrid was vomiting blood by the time she was locked away like an animal.<p>

Drago had only delivered the first blow, but it was by far the worst. Steel capped toes had slammed into her abdomen and she had felt as well as heard her ribs crack and splinter. The kick had sent her sprawling, lying sideways on the deck with a scream and furious curse. She had heaved herself back to her knees before the next blow came, and the next.

She knew his intention, and she was quietly glad her lies had been taken so well. They were trying to kill a child that she knew herself didn't exist. That being said, as the guards landed blow after blow along her torso and hips, she regretted ever being stupid enough to be caught at all.

A fist tangled itself in her hair, pulling sharply and taking half the hair from its roots. She cried out, no longer caring if they heard her pain, and gritted her teeth sharply. She was glad enough that her lungs hadn't been punctured with the first blow, and with each hissing breath through gritted teeth, she counted herself lucky.

She felt cool steel against her spine, digging into the already tender flesh, and tried to turn to face whichever guard was behind her.

"I like a bitch that's branded like cattle."

She twisted her back, the point of the knife dragging against her skin as she rammed her head into the guard's knee with an unsatisfying thump.

A jovial laugh came from her left - Posen.

"She's good. Lock her up."

Hands were shoved under her arms, wrenching her to her feet - her knees collapsed under her own weight and she slumped forward, coughing and spitting out blood soaked saliva. The hands returned, bruising, grabbing at her chest and squeezing her breasts painfully before she was thrown over a shoulder with a snickering laugh.

She went kicking and scratching and biting, without a single word.

She could smell the dome before she saw it - the sharp, metallic tang of blood and iron - and heard the heavy clunking of the mechanism before her captor climbed over the side and into the dark.

"She's not to be raped."

Posen. The voice came from outside, but echoed around the dome. There was a clattering of feet against metal as the other guard entered, then a third person.

A sharp screech of metal filled the space and before she knew what was happening, Astrid was being shoved into a rough metal cage, too short to stand in and too narrow to sit - she crouched, hunched and aching, and didn't let her discomfort show. The iron was latticed and rusted, clammy with algae and fungus, but sturdy. One guard shoved her in as the other snapped the top of the cage shut and locked, before they sat themselves on either side, glancing over at her hungrily. She bared her teeth in response.

"Not yet anyway."

Posen was invisible in the darkness of the dome, avoiding the single crack of light that leaked through the open roof.

"If you lay a hand on me, I'll bite it off," she snarled. "The same goes for any other body part."

There was a laugh, long and low, and it struck more fear in her than any of their blows had.

"You needn't worry about them."

She couldn't see the detail of Posen's movement but she could hear his even, echoing steps.

"You must be hungry."

He came into the light to kneel beside her cage, surveying her like a potter with cracked wares. Astrid stared back evenly, trying to recall everything she knew of Posen and use it to her advantage.

He was foreign, although in this army, who wasn't? He'd been one of the first to join Drago, according to Eret, even before Eret himself. He'd once been a general of an army opposing Drago, the story went, but had turned on his own people and offered up his regiments in exchange for power and safety, and had attacked his own city under Drago's command the next day.

He liked his whores fair skinned and red haired, Eret had once said with a dark glare.

"I understand you've flown some distance on your traitorous dragon - please, you must be hungry."

Silence. They couldn't take her silence from her. No matter what wounds they inflicted, how many teeth they broke and bones they snapped, they could not force words from her mouth, so she held his gaze and pursed her lips. Silence was all she had left.

Posen pulled a folded cloth from his pocket, unwrapping it before her. A pungent odour wafted toward her and she gagged, and vomited more blood, her throat clammy with blood and bile.

"Ah, you see boys? This is why you should only ever come in a whore's mouth. They get themselves pregnant and then you have to deal with this."

Astrid managed to find the mind to spit on his boots, then probed around her mouth with her tongue, trying to strip the acidic taste from her teeth. One of her molars was loose and bleeding, from the single blow that had landed on her chin.

There was a chunk of rotten meat resting on the cloth in the palm of Posen's hand. He held it close again, and this time, she spat up at him instead.

"Eat."

She slammed her jaw closed, ignoring the stab of pain from her abused bones and broken teeth. Her gut shifted, wanting to vomit again, but she kept her mouth shut.

"If you do what I say, this will all be much easier for you."

She looked up at him with hatred in her eyes.

"Fine. Bring in the boy."

She couldn't stop the flash of fear from overtaking her features. Posen smiled thinly.

"Looks like we've found a weakness after all gents."

There was a cry, high pitched and terrible, before the tiny body of Eret, son of Eret fell forward into the dome. One of the guards grabbed him roughly and pressed a knife against his throat.

"Now, I'm sure this isn't actually your bastard - no, you're far too young. The Dragon Rider, your _Hiccup_ wouldn't have known where to stick his cock in you four years ago - he's just a boy himself. But I'm sure you know how this works, so -"

Posen gestured to the guard, who tightened his grip on the child.

"What's your name?"

She didn't move. How could she - knowing in one direction was death and the other was watching the murder of a child she had cared for as her own? She ground her teeth as the guard pushed the knife closer against the boy's skin, and he started to sob.

"Let me make this very clear. I only ask twice. So, for the second time - what is your—"

"Astrid!"

Her jaw was still clamped shut. The boy's wasn't.

"Her name's Astrid and she isn't my real mother but please don't hurt her!"

Posen raised an eyebrow and looked down at the boy. "And why did she and your father pretend she was your mother?"

"Because they want to kill the big man."

The knife had started to slice through the thin skin of the boy's neck, a thin trail of blood seeping down his skin to mix with his tears.

"They?"

"Her and mama's friend. The one who doesn't fuck her."

"Hiccup?"

The boy nodded wordlessly.

"Good boy, Eret. Very good. Now..."

Posen knelt, holding out the hunk of rotten meat to Astrid again, watching as her eyes watered.

"One more thing before we let you go to your mother Eret."

Astrid struggled to hide the shock in her face. Posen saw it, and grinned.

"Yes, we have the whore. Have had for a few months. She's not looking too good now, I'm sure you can imagine. We figured we should keep an eye on... risky assets, especially considering her habit of running off with our captains and bearing bastard sons. And now our captain turned traitor and - I think we put them in the same cell, just so she could watch him bleed out."

Eret whimpered as the guard held him closer, the cut on his neck becoming a dribbling gash.

"Eat."

Posen pushed the meat through the bars, level with Astrid's mouth. Up close, she could see it was mouldy and dusted with dirt, a few maggots writhing on the surface, more beneath it. It smelled months old and half-cured.

"It's not too bad, I promise. In fact, I think you like swallowing this particular beast. And if you don't, we'll kill the boy and let his mother watch him die too."

Astrid's head darted forward and she snapped the meat with her incisors, swallowing it without chewing and almost choking on the solid lump in her throat. She wanted to gag, to vomit, to scream and break her chains and kill every man in this army, but instead she swallowed, and turned her gaze to the floor. She swallowed again, and felt it drop like a stone into her gut, and told herself that the writhing of maggots beneath her skin was all in her mind. Whatever it was, the meat was rotten, and disgusting, but she wouldn't die for it.

"Very good, _Astrid._ Very good."

Posen stood and gestured to the guard. "Take the boy to his mother. Do not touch her. She's my property. And bring the rest of Astrid's food in." He turned to look down at her. "She still looks hungry."

She kept her eyes on the rotting wooden floor as the guards scrabbled out of the dome, one returning almost instantly.

"Ah, good."

She heard something being handed to Posen, something heavy that rattled with chains.

"Now, Astrid - would you care for more?"

He dropped the bundle in front of her, right onto the wood she's been staring at. He watched with a sickening grin as her eyes widened, then shrunk in fear, before she was hitting the sides of the cage and screaming and trying to vomit and curse him at the same time, panting and screeching and trying to convince herself that what she saw wasn't real.

That what sat before her on the deck, and she had eaten, wasn't real.

A crudely severed leg, with a steel trap still enclosed around.

* * *

><p>"What happened to Astrid? Once you took her?"<p>

Hiccup paused in the ropes he was knotting around the Nadder's horns. They lacked the time to make proper saddles, so he'd had to improvise, tying rope around necks and bodies and horns to create some kind of hand hold for the new riders. He couldn't help remembering that Astrid had flown bareback on Stormfly so long she barely needed the saddle, and had to bury his thoughts before his heart ached again.

So Hiccup gritted his teeth when his cousin's question came.

Snoutlout had finally found a Nadder he liked- a dark green and vermillion one with sharp teeth and the underbite of a male. The Nadder, unlike practically every dragon they'd tried, had actually liked him back, and the bond had been struck quickly. Hookfang, he'd said, and the dragon responded. The name rang a bell, and Hiccup realised it was what Lout had named the largest lizard of his collection every summer when they were small.

Snoutlout held a hand on the dragon's snout as Hiccup knotted the guide ropes, calming the creature and strengthening their connection.

"She tried to kill me," Hiccup answered honestly. "A few times."

"Before or after she realised it was you?"

"Both. More times after, but she figured it out pretty quickly." He decided to leave out the part where he kissed her as soon as they'd landed and she'd tried to break all his bones.

"And why's she on the enemy ships and not you?"

"They know me - I've been a prisoner there before. But anyone in his army who'd seen her is dead, so—"

The Nadder crooned, low in his throat, as Hiccup accidentally put too much strain on one of its spines. Snoutlout rubbed the dragon's nose, almost on reflex, and looked into Hookfang's eyes with what he thought was reassurance.

"When did you first fuck her?"

Snoutlout almost seemed as shocked by his own question as Hiccup. He paused to look at his cousin, incredulously, then went back to his task as if the question wasn't asked.

"Don't pretend you haven't."

Hiccup held his tongue and increased his pace, looping the ropes back around to create something like reins. He didn't like it - dragons weren't horses, and wouldn't be steered by a bit in their mouths or a pull of their horns, but for now it was the best option he had.

"She said you didn't touch her until she touched you first."

Hiccup made a mental note to have a very serious talk with Astrid about the boundaries of discussing their sex life. He hadn't had to worry before - she'd had no one to tell - but if she'd said this to Snoutlout, what had she told Ruff?

Then again, the memory of her hefting him over her shoulder and literally carting him to bed was one of his favourites. Particularly when she'd grabbed his ass (to keep him steady, she claimed) and he felt entirely wanted, for possibly the first time in his life. Touch him first, she definitely had.

"I never would have thought you'd get any girl in your bed - especially not Astrid."

A lifetime of sneers and puckered faces and idiotic insults sprang unbidden to the front of his mind, and he couldn't resist the urge to, just once, flaunt to his cousin that Astrid Hofferson - beautiful, terrifying Astrid Hofferson - had chosen to sling him over her shoulder and squeeze

his ass.

"She isn't in my bed. I'm in hers." He could practically see her wry grin. "She steals the blankets too."

Something between hurt and jealousy passed over Snoutlout's face, and he buried it with disgust. "Trust you to be all sickening. I thought you were going to suffocate her earlier."

Hiccup smiled, unconsciously, at the memory of her lips against his and her tongue running over his teeth. He'd taught her that, he realised, all those months ago in the cave. Was he her first real kiss? Definitely first tongue, first (and hopefully only) lover, but had she ever willingly kissed a man before? He'd have to ask her. Maybe he could tease the answer out of her. He'd been meaning to take her back to the beach on the cove island, where he ran from her that night to chase control and relief without her. He could –

"Hiccup - Midguard to Hiccup - oh gods he's thinking about Tiny Tits isn't he?"

He had been so wrapped up in his thoughts that he hadn't even noticed the twins landing on their dragons, Tuffnut astride a Gronkle with broken teeth he'd named Rock-Munch. Worldburner lowered his neck and let Ruff slide to the ground, and Hiccup had to admit that she looked more deadly and comfortable on the back of a dragon than she ever had on the ground. Maybe it was the way she'd knotted her braids together behind her, or just the idea of the twins being backed up with fire power.

"Who's your friend?" She nodded at the Nadder, raising an eyebrow at Snoutlout.

"Hookfang."

She rolled her eyes. "Like the lizards?"

Snoutlout bristled, and the dragon pushed forward into his hands, trying to comfort his obviously distressed rider. Ruffnut took one look and burst out laughing.

"Looks like I've been replaced." She didn't give him time to reply, turning to Hiccup instead. "Hey, this'll get your cock up - we just saw that blue Nadder on its way back here."

"Which one?"

"Which one do you think?" Tuffnut asked, as if it were obvious and he hadn't had to ask his sister the same question when she'd wheeled in the air to point it out. "Astrid's."

Hiccup's heart leapt of its own accord. "Astrid?"

"Thor almightly, he's got it bad. You don't even sound like that when you're coming."

Toothless could tell what was wrong even as Ruffnut spoke - he had uncurled from his sleep when the twins and their unruly dragons landed, and had been listening lazily, but when Astrid was mentioned, his wings were already outstretched. Hiccup didn't even have to check where he was - the dragon was next to his rider as soon as he had turned.

They were in the sky before Snoutlout had time to process Ruffnut's jibe, shooting through the Viking riders with a speed and grace which seemed impossible. Hiccup could feel Toothless' wings beating through the rig, beating hard and fast where he'd usually glide, pushing speed from his body. He adjusted his left leg to the pace, silently thanking his battle brother and knowing he felt the same anxious pull in his chest.

The cloud of dragons around the edges of the cliff was thick and cloying, beginner riders and untamed dragons wheeling this way and that - Toothless picked a seamless path through them, wheeling left and right and snapping his jaws in warning. The dragons obeyed, their riders confused, and Hiccup heard shouts and yells, but didn't bother listening.

Astrid.

The air had chilled when the sun had set, but it wasn't until that moment that he felt the cold. There was a wheeling speck on the horizon, a dragon he knew, coming closer and closer, but he didn't let himself believe it was her until she was close enough to reach out and touch.

He could tell from a distance she was injured - she tipped to one side in the sky, and batted her left wing hard and fast while her right barely moved. Up close, he could see the tear in the thin

skin of her wings, a hole rather than a slice, which made a hideous shooting sound with every beat of her wings.

Stormfly slowed as her eyes caught Toothless, and she let out a pitiful trill, face contorted in pain. Toothless slowed, ready to help her as he had a hundred times before, but Hiccup dug his heels into the dragon's flank, urging him on. It broke his heart to see Stormfly's trusting face break as they flew past, Toothless snapping at her to return to the cliffs.

It was more than an hour's flight, they'd calculated together in the cove - the equivalent of three days sailing, four in bad wind. The ships were close enough for her to warn him, and he kept close enough to catch any warnings, but still far enough to avoid suspicion. He usually took longer, staying within the clouds until the last moment, to catch a quick glimpse of the ship with its butterfly mast before ducking back into the clouds. Lately, he had only ever checked for the scarf, not the woman, knowing that if he saw her asleep on the deck he'd be unable to leave her there.

It took them less than 30 minutes to be within sight of the ships.

He knew he should be cautious - should bank up into the sky and hide in the darkness if not the clouds, but he held Toothless level until they were within spitting distance. He scanned the fleet desperately, checking for -

There. A double mast, and a flash of blue.

Hiccup didn't see the net coming - Toothless barely had time to pull his wings in and plummet towards the sea, out of range. He wheeled of his own accord, feeling Hiccup's rage, and started back towards Berk.

Over the past five years, Toothless had seen Hiccup truly furious only twice. The first time was when his rider's mother had refused to heed his advice and he had taken to the sky to escape her pragmatism. Less than a day later, he had again shown the rare emotion at the sight of rusty cliffs and scattered corpses. Toothless had been the one to spot the body, sprawled by a spire of ice, the sole human on a battlefield of dragons. Her face had been unrecognisable, smashed and beaten to bloody pulp, her staff beside her, tainted with blood.

Hiccup had screamed, deep and fierce, and sworn to take Drago's blood himself.

For the next two years, Toothless saw glimpses of his rider's fury, in soft and deadly words, and angry blows. He had been annoyed, if anything, by the destruction of Berk. He had been disbelieving at his own people's savagery in offering him the golden haired woman. He had shown all kinds of emotions at her behaviour, all tinged with lust and regret, becoming more and more passionate. The past three months had been full of fear - not for himself, never for himself - but for the woman who had found a place in the heart he'd forsaken for his mother's revenge.

As he sped over the sea to the sound of his rider's pained and fierce yells, Toothless knew he was witnessing fury once again, and quietly feared the aftermath.

* * *

><p>It was the thought of Hiccup, broken and grieving, that stopped her from killing herself.<p>

She could feel the gentle tap of the Zippieback tooth against her sternum every time she moved. She supposed she should be glad that it had gone unrecognised - that she had been left with this final option. Part of her wanted to believe that she could still use it for revenge, that she could shove it into the throat of Drago or Posen or her guards, but she knew it was useless. Her shoulders were ruined - slumped and crushed forward by the tiny cage, and her arms didn't have the space to move with speed.

The only person left she could use it on was herself.

She wondered vaguely if she really could kill herself. She'd never killed in cold blood, she realised with a jolt - for all the blood on her hands, it had come in battle, hot and red and pulsing through her veins. Maybe that was why she'd had such trouble killing Hiccup - not because she'd pitied him, or known him since birth, or because the gods had willed that one day she'd save his life and join his side and love him with every fibre of her being, but simply because she had never done it before.

There were plenty of things she'd done with Hiccup that she had never done before, but she was savagely glad that cold blooded murder wasn't one of them.

She let her mind drift to kinder times - the ghosting of his fingers against her skin, even the most innocent touches that had set her on fire, the heat of his body pressed against her. The words he'd whispered thinking she was asleep, resting their bound hands against his lips, and having to stifle her own laughing when he realised she was awake by the pinch of her spare hand on his ass. Him surging into her when she finally told him she wanted him, pushing any regrets from her tongue with a stroke of his own.

There was a grunting from one side, and she tried to block it out. The guards had been told not to touch her, to leave her clean and fresh, but Posen had made it clear that he had no objection to them touching themselves at the sight of their half naked captive. They had started out jeering, leering at her in her thin bindings, prodding and poking at her as close as they could through the bars. She had tried to look down, only to see the gnarled and sickening remains of Hiccup's leg laid out before her. They had loved that, the sharp gasp and gagging she couldn't control, and began jerking themselves to the sound of her vomiting.

They had argued as to whether Posen's instruction ruled out coming on her trapped body, and had finally decided to play it safe if they wanted any claim on her once she was taken out of her cage.

It wouldn't be that hard, she thought, running her fingers along the pendant. Just shove the sharpened end into her pulse, and wait for the poison to take her. She kept the point sharp enough, especially once it was out of her hair. She had seen the lucid hallucinations Zibbleback poison could cause - maybe she'd be lucky enough to not even know she was dying. Maybe she'd just wake in the next life, although she was starting to doubt she'd make it Valhalla considering all the angry threats she'd made to the gods.

Her parents wouldn't miss her. Berk wouldn't mourn her - they had already made it clear that her life was worth little to them in the scheme of things. Stormfly would croon and look sadly at the sea, if she'd escaped uninjured, but would go on to live her life in the sky alone once again.

But it would destroy Hiccup.

He would blame himself - if he lived long enough to find her body. She wouldn't be there to tell him he was an idiot and she was the one who'd slipped up and been captured, so he would cry and scream that her death was his fault and no one would argue. Astrid didn't know much about love, but what she did know she knew in tandem with Hiccup - she knew the irresistible, magnetic pull over continents and seas, the quickened pulse at the sight of her husband, the sharp thrum of pleasure and total completion found only in each other. She knew that Hiccup felt as much, if not more, towards her.

She knew that if he died it would ruin her, and she couldn't leave Hiccup to feel that pain alone.

She flexed her cramped fingers, imagining them settling around Posen's neck, and wrenching it to the side and snapping his spine.

She would die kicking and screaming. She would die with hot, pulsing blood in her veins and fire in her heart. She wouldn't die by her own hand in the floor of a cage as savages jeered and taunted her.

Astrid Hofferson would die fighting, or she would not die at all.

25. It Ends Today

****Just another warning: this is not a pretty chapter. Nice things don't really happen. There is detailed discussion of sexual assault, violence and language that frankly I'm not even comfortable with. So if that's not your deal, this is probably not your chapter (or at least skip the Astrid sections).****

* * *

><p>"We cannot risk losing an army to save one woman."<p>

The words bought a sick, sour feeling to the pit of his stomach, and he had to clench his fists into his thighs to avoid throwing them at his father.

"Do you have any idea what they'll do to her if she's been found out?"

Stoick sighed heavily, rubbing his brow. "That isn't what I mean, Hiccup."

"Then what do you mean? That you're okay with leaving her to be raped and tortured? _Again?_" The crowd that had gathered at Hiccup's return took a collective step back as the heir stormed up to their chief, finally tall enough to look him in the eye with fury. "You didn't stop them last time. _Of course_ you're fine with whatever Drago and his thugs will do to her!"

"**Enough!**"

The force of Stoick's yell was enough to physically throw Hiccup back a step.

"You cannot command an army with half a day's training!"

"The dragons have _months_ of training - it's your soldiers that are the dead weight—"

"Well then why didn't you come back sooner?" Snoutlout snapped, stepping within the ring of spectators to join the argument. "You could have all of Berk trained by now, ready for the attack!"

Hiccup stared at his cousin in disbelief. "This village has slaughtered dragons for three hundred years. You drove my mother away, and fifteen years later I had to leave for the same reason. This village offered up my wife to a demon for a vague hope of surrender, and —"

"Wife?"

Snoutlout had heard Hiccup use the word before - with anger in his eyes as he listed the reasons his time couldn't be wasted - but it hadn't struck him until now.

Wife.

Hiccup could feel the stares growing darker. They had all seen her kiss him, defending him with words and blades, but this information was new. She had been offered to him as a wife. And it seemed, that for all his lofty words and noble goals, he had taken their offering.

"Yes. Wife. As of two days ago."

The stare didn't abate, and Stoick's face became fixed in a scowl.

"The legitimacy of your union means nothing," the chief said with a resigned tinge. "Your... mistress, cannot take precedence over this village."

Hiccup swore and stamped a foot to the ground. "_Nothing_ has changed. It's just moved forwards. We'll strike tonight, before he has the sun—"

"With half a day's training?"

"And no suitable arms?"

"We can hardly get the beasts to fly without throwing us!"

Hiccup retreated, stepping back into himself as the dozen shouted objections, until he bumped into Toothless' side. The dragon turned to him, with a pained expression. He knew how much this hurt his rider, but couldn't comprehend the politics that were stopping them from attacking _now_ and taking Astrid to safety with fire and blood and ripping Drago to shred.

"I owe her a blood debt!"

He had to shout to be heard over the din. At the ancient words, the crowd silenced.

"Astrid saved my life in this exact situation three months ago. And I cannot, with any honour, leave her there. This is older than anything we have, older than our marriage, than —" he swallowed thickly, trying to find a polite way of phrasing his brutal honesty, and seeing none. "Older than our _union_, or anything of the sort. This is a debt owed in battle, and one that no honest man can abandon."

He swung himself into Toothless' saddle, sitting tall and proud atop the dragon.

"You can argue strategy, and politics, and legitimacies. If you want any chance of destroying Drago, you will have to follow me, _now._"

Toothless bared his teeth with snarl, completing the dangerous words. The crowd, both dragon and human, was silent.

"Wait - why are we being idiots?"

Of all people to side with him, Hiccup would have put Tuffnut Thorston at the bottom of the list. Yet here he was, stepping into the arena of argument, hands forward.

"I mean, Hiccup has a _Night Fury_. And he wants his honey back, from a guy who wants to burn this island to the ground - or, into the ocean or whatever. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm all for burning stuff to the ground, but I'd rather set fire to all those ships that are coming to steal our stuff. So... why are we even arguing about this?"

Rock-Munch, the gap toothed Gronkle, shifted closer to his rider in unspoken agreement.

"We haven't been properly trained, idiot. How are we supposed to match up to Hiccup when he's had _years_ to prepare?" Snoutlout's voice dripped with contempt for the twin, but for once, Tuffnut wasn't having it. He'd been on the receiving end of the future chief's condescension too long, and had stood silent at the disrespect of his sister one too many times.

"And how is two days going to make any difference? Two days, half a day - we're all dying anyway. Hiccup's got a hot piece of wife to die for, I've got a new mace I want to get some blood on - what the Hel kind of Vikings sit around arguing instead of going out and destroying stuff?"

Tuffnut turned to Hiccup, gesturing that a little backup would be much appreciate. Hiccup cleared his throat and tried to inject some menace into his tone._

"Any Viking who comes with me now stands a better chance to seeing Valhalla than the cowards to quake in their boots on land. And any man who stays here will not have the privilege of watching Drago Bludvist die, because I _will_ kill him."

He looked purposefully over to his father, a lifetime of hidden rage bubbling to the surface.

"This ends ****today****."

* * *

><p>"You will be raped, of course."<p>

Astrid didn't look up, didn't react. She had finished screaming, hours ago, and blacked out more than once since then. The guards hadn't changed and she'd been left alone for the most part, but now, as dawn began to streak the sky she could see through the cracks in her prison, Posen had returned.

"Many, many times actually." He spoke casually, lazily, circling her cage slowly like a bear watching a rabbit in a trap. "It's a shame Drago's such a brutal man - I'd rather have kept you fresh instead of beating you like dog. Your little..._culinary exploration_ yesterday did more damage than any beating, I'd wager. And not a mark on your flesh!"

He sighed heavily and rested on his haunches, down at her level. "But, there is a chain of command and Drago is at its peak, so I let him beat you because if nothing else, I know I get first claim."

He leaned in closer, pressing his nose against the bars of her cage and sniffing. She wanted to reach forward and rip the flesh from his face.

"The chain of command," he continued, straightening to pace, "means that technically, Drago gets you first. But he tends not to be interested, although..." He took a moment to look at her, tilting his head to one side. Her skin crawled as his foot poked at the hunk of severed flesh still resting on the floor. "He may be interested this time. Either way, I'm next, since I found you. Then the other generals, then the captains, and once your cunt and your mouth and your ass are torn and bleeding, you'll be handed over to the men."

He paused, looking over at the guards. "I might give these two a go before we put you in the hold. There's never much left once the common soldier has his turn."

He turned back to her. "I think I'll fuck you first, nice and simple. Put my hands around your pretty little neck and leave some bruises of my own. Maybe scratch out a few of those tattoos when

I'm in your ass. Although I do like the idea of your pretty face staring up at me while I fuck it."

He elbowed one of the guards. "Where do you think I should start?"

Astrid glared up at him, silent as the grave and practically dripping menace.

"I'd go for her cunt while it's still tight."

"Good - very good. Start simple. That lover of hers can't be much more than a boy - she might not be used to having a real cock in her. Although - she might start bleeding if she really was carrying his bastard, and I hardly want--"

"I'll start with you."

Her voice was low and poisonous, and she kept her eyes firmly on Posen.

"I'll kill you first," she elaborated, then looked to the guard who had spoken. "Then him. I'll rip your tongue out of your throat and feed it to him, then I'll kick out your teeth and use them to grind your eyes back into your brain. He'll choke on your tongue, drown in his own blood, and you won't be able to scream as I cut every piece of flesh and every nerve I can find on your hideous body. And - no, wait. I won't kill you first."

She narrowed her eyes and hissed her last words.

"You'll die last, hung out on a mast for the birds. Drago will be long dead, and your army decimated, and you'll watch it all from high above, begging me to kill you."

She spat up at him, a glob of saliva and blood and vomit.

"And I'll watch you fall apart, and feed you your own flesh."

There was a pregnant, poisonous pause, before Posen laughed, and pulled a knife from his belt. "Looks like you lads get the pleasure of holding her down."

There was a scream, somewhere outside and above the dome, sharp and terrified and feminine, growing louder and closer before ending abruptly with a thunk of the deck.

"What the fuck was that?"

Posen paused, knife still in hand.

Then the side of the ship imploded, and everything went to Hel.

* * *

><p>"Ruff! Take down the traps!"<p>

"On it!"

The Monsterous Nightmare and its rider wheeled in the sky, hurling white hot flames along the sides of each ship, melting the traps and net launchers to puddles of scrap. The Nightmare cared not for the traps launched at it - Worldburner had not remained free so long through lack of threats. Ruffnut whooped with it, and for the first time, Hiccup allowed himself to believe that this would work.

Less than a dozen Vikings had been willing to join him, in defiance of his father and any ruler of their tribe. Three of the ten to join him were the twins and Fishlegs, supplemented by Gobber and some older warriors who figured the end of their time was already coming and battle was a far better way to die than shitting themselves in their beds.

He had hastily scratched diagrams in the dirt, relaying as many facts as he had time for, and as few as he could get away with.

"The main ship is here," he said, drawing a crude circle, "and it's surrounded by ships on all sides. But here," he added a square on the bow of the circle, "is the Alpha. It needs space, so that side of the main ship is empty save for that. No traps - just chains."

"Can we kill it?"

Fishlegs sounded apprehensive, if not downright terrified.

"We kill Drago first. He controls it. So we come in from this side," he continued, adding in ships and barges, "and we should be clear for the last few hundred yards. Destroying the main ship is our priority - on my signal, use all the fire power you have on it."

"Signal?"

"If we had three days, I would say to just attack. But Drago isn't the only thing on that ship."

He added half a dozen smaller circles within the largest.

"There'll be domes on the deck. Huge steel dragon traps. They're opened by a system of cogs on the side - if you find yourself close enough to one at any point, open it and free whatever's inside, man or beast."

"Or Astrid."

Hiccup took a deep breath, trying to calm himself at Ruff's words. "Anyone injured you find, load onto your dragons and drop them to these ships here," he added a few triangle. "They're healers boats. We'll secure them once Drago is dead, but it's better for the sick to be there. Same goes for any of you injured in the attack."

"If we survive!"

Lars Thorston was as mad as he was old, almost as mad as his grandchildren, but he sounded more excited than concerned about impending death.

"Ruff, Tuff, I want you destroying things. Fishlegs and Gobber, I want you to co-ordinate a surrender from any outlier boats who fly a white flag. Take Sven and Hoark with you, and try to work out where any generals are. We want to seize them as soon as possible, to negotiate a ceasefire once Drago's gone. Other riders, follow the twin's lead."

There were groans at that idea. Toothless nudged his head in to look at the crude map, and sniffed approvingly.

"We leave in an hour. Grab any weapons you can - more than you can carry. The dragon can take most of the weight. Ruff, see if you can wipe any spare weapons on Worldburner's flank - his spit--"

"It's what lights up - I get it Hiccup." Ruff straightened and brushed her jacket. "What will you do about late volunteers?"

Hiccup shrugged. "I'll take any man I can get."

"Good."

She disappeared, leaving the warriors to arm their dragons and Hiccup to scrub out his plan in the dirt. Just as his foot hovered over the shapes, he felt the air beside him shift.

"This is treason."

There was no bitterness in his father's words - only regret.

"To directly disobey the chief's orders and lead a force to war is an attempted coup at best. Spitelout and The Council will have you tried for treason as soon as you set foot back on this island."

"If I survive."

Stoick sighed with resignation. "I'd almost believe you will, Hiccup. You always seem to." He paused to breathe heavily. "You're a fool."

"Yeah. I guess that's what makes us different."

He turned, no longer afraid or awed by the larger man - now he saw him for what he was. A man, plain and simple.

"If you die?"

"So will he."

"And so will Astrid."

Hiccup's eyes narrowed. "You know what it is to have your wife killed by Drago Bludvist."

Stoick shook his head. "I don't. Before yesterday, she was killed by dragons. But I put my hatred of them aside for you, and your plans. And now you ask too much Hiccup. I cannot follow you to certain death."

"The more men I have, the less certain death is."

Stoick sighed. "If only that were true. But when you face that man, you'll face him alone."

Hiccup swallowed. "I won't be alone. I'll have Toothless. And if the gods be good, I'll have Astrid too. If I have a chance to kill him, I'll take it, even if none of this is what I asked for."

"And what would you ask for?"

Hiccup balled his fists, still resisting the urge to scream and rage at the sky. "I'd ask for Astrid here, and safe, and another two years to teach every Viking on Berk to side with their dragons as friends and partners, not tools of war, and I'd ask for my mother to still be alive and to live in a house on a hill with Astrid and Toothless in a world where our children are given dragon eggs as Snoggletog gifts. But that's ****never going to happen****, so I'll pray for a quick death once I've found revenge."

He pulled himself into Toothless' saddle, trying to run.

"Very well."

He looked down at his father in distain. "Very well?"

"Very well. I'll follow you."

"Into treason?"

"A chief cannot commit treason Hiccup - he defines it."

An hour later, Skullcrusher perched on the edge of the cliff with Toothless, tasting the wind.

Hiccup approached Worldburner carefully, aware of the dragon's skittish nature, holding out his empty palm before offering up his sword. The dragon licked it, coating the blade for flame, and Hiccup was sliding it back into its sheath when he felt the tough fingers dig into his shoulders.

"Swear that you love her."

Ruff's breath wafted hot onto his cheek, but her voice was deadly.

"Swear to me that you do."

He twisted carefully in her grip, nodding emphatically. He was surprised to see her eyes were raw and red, and her dagger was drawn. She snarled at him, as if testing his resolve.

"I love her."

Her finger relaxed their claw-like grip, and she almost collapsed forwards.

"Good," she said, in something that could have been a sob. "Then let's kill these ratfuckers and get her back."

Killing the ratfuckers, Hiccup had had to caution, would be kept to a minimum, especially on the outer boats. He'd deliberately plotted a path through the fleet that would keep them as far from Eret's ship as possible, and Drago's policy of keeping the conscripts and coin soldiers at the edges of his force had become a huge advantage.

It had taken almost two hours to reach the fleet with the inexperienced riders - two hours for him to shout orders and refine his plans to include his father. Two hours to question Eret's loyalty

and wonder if he was the reason Astrid had raised the alarm. Two hours to fear for her, alone and entirely at risk.

But now they were near, and he had no room to think. He could only react, and pray that the gods were on his side once again.

Rock-Munch spat a spray of searing lava on the smaller traps as Worldburner led the way with flame and fury. Gobber and Fishlegs hung close behind, watching for surrender. The older riders fanned out, following Ruff and Tuff and raining fire into the sea, rising great clouds of steam and shielding the rest of their numbers.

The dragons knew what they were doing - they had been trained for this moment, drilled until the motions were muscle memory. Their riders, on the other hand, could only hold on for dear life.

"Flag!"

The cry came from Fishlegs, as he angled his Gronkle towards one of the outermost ships. Sure enough, a white flag had been hung on its mast, its crew yelling with their arms empty and outstretched.

"Dragons!"

Ruff's voice cut through the steam cloud and she wheeled back towards Hiccup with a flash of fear in her eyes. Behind her, dark masses grew in the hazy air - enemy dragons.

"**Do not **shoot to kill!" Hiccup yelled over his shoulder. "Dodge attacks, and only return if you have a clear hit. Ruff, Tuff, change of plans - draw any fire you can from them! Use up their shot limit!"

"Got it!"

"I've got it more!"

"No you haven't - you never have!"

"I do now!"

The first of the armoured dragons burst through the clouds just as Ruffnut steered Worldburner through two close ships, whooping loudly and egging on her dragon to a bone shattering roar. The armoured dragons followed, unable to see or smell in the misted salty air, and as Hiccup darted forwards and past them, he noticed Ruff sticking close to the traps along the starboard side of one ship. When an armoured Rumblehorn finally unleashed a stream of fire, the Nightmare rolled out of harm's way, leaving the flames to strike the ship and its weapons.

"Good going Ruff! Keep it up! Dad, you're with me!"

There was a shout from somewhere behind him - another ship offering surrender. Hiccup didn't bother to check which one it was - for now, all that mattered to him was the main ship.

Skullcrusher drew next to Toothless, Stoick sitting tall on his back with only a rope around the dragon's middle as a handhold.

"The main ship?"

Hiccup nodded. "The bow. The mist will be thin closer - get Skullcrusher to burn the water as we approach."

His father nodded, once, and tightened the hand he had on the rope. His other was closed around the handle of a war hammer, sworn for revenge.

Hiccup placed a reassuring hand on Toothless' side, and adjusted his foot in the tail rig.

"You okay bud?"

Toothless snorted and lowered his head, streamlining himself. Unconsciously, Hiccup did the same.

"Now!"

They shot through the edge of the steam cloud, and barely had time to gain their bearings - over a

patch of uninhabited ocean, the bow of the main ship directly in front of them surrounded by a milling crowd of dragons, an imposing figure waiting on its bow - before Skullcrusher bucked wildly and threw Stoick from his back.

"Dad!"

Toothless wheeled, shooting down and hooking a claw through Stoick's cloak and dragging him back into the air. Hiccup kept his gaze on Skullcrusher, as the dragon tossed and bucked in the sky, as if unable to control his own body.

"Hiccup!"

The scream came from back in the steam cloud, but was unmistakable - Ruffnut. He could see the shadow of Worldburner approaching, towards the blank patch of bubbling sea that they hovered over, but as he watched, the dragon burst into flames, over all of his body.

No.

Worldburner broke through the cloud and shot past Hiccup and Toothless, headed for the sea of dragons above the main ship. He was entirely alight and, as Hiccup watched, Ruff threw herself from her burning seat and fell to the deck of the ship.

No!

Skullcrusher was still reeling beside them, uncertain, as Rock-Munch, then Meatlug, then every dragon in their army crashed by them, all headed for flock above the main ship. The only ones left were Skullcrusher, still tossing and turning like a raging bull, and Toothless.

The bonded dragons were gone.

"Fuck!" Hiccup swung in his saddle, leaning as far down as he could to look at Toothless' belly and his father held below it. "Dad, you need to speak to him. You need to use the bond!"

But as he looked below and met Stoick's eye, for the first time in his life Hiccup saw his father terrified. The chief shook his head, suspended a hundred feet in the air by the grip of a dragon, and couldn't move.

"Dad! If you don't help him, he'll--"

Hiccup watched in horror as Skullcrusher dropped towards the ocean, as if he had lost control of his wings, then stopped dead in the sky. The dragon looked up at them, his pupils shrinking to slits.

Shit!

There was still time. He could still finish this. The figure on the bow watched them, cool and calculating, and they wheeled in the air and shot towards him.

Toothless needed no prompting - after five years, it was as if he could read Hiccup's very thoughts - and together, they dropped towards the main ship. Toothless launched a bolt of blue into the side of the ship before he banked up, dropping Stoick at the bow before skidding, Hiccup still attached, to face the man he had to kill.

However this ended, it ended ****today.****

* * *

><p>Astrid's cage was knocked onto its side by the force of the explosion.<p>

She lay there, prone, as the guards and Posen found their feet again with angry curses. She looked somehow more trapped, stuck on her side with her face pressed into the deck and her hands stuck behind her back, her head brushing the hinged top of her prison.

"Fuck." Posen looked over her, torn. "I'd say to count yourself lucky, but you really aren't. I will be back, once this pathetic attack is dealt with, and then I plan to fuck you with the rest of your dead lover's body cut into chunks around you. Mark my words Astrid. Mark them."

He hoisted himself over the side of dome - as soon as he was gone, the guards turned to one another.

"No fucking way are we surviving this."

"And if we do, he won't."

The larger one nodded, and unsheathed a hunting knife as the smaller rustled through his keys. He laughed, low and snickering, as he unlocked the hinged top and dragged Astrid out by her hair. She went with a sharp cry and then a scream as the large one used his knife to slice through the side of her skirt and rip it from her body. She struggled to all fours, scuttling away, slipping and sliding and regaining control of her limbs before she collapsed again. The momentum slid her along the clammy deck, arms first, and she struggled to pull herself into a sitting position.

"It's almost too easy."

"Hurry up!"

Her head hung low, hair covering most of her face, but it wasn't her face they were interested in. They didn't notice as she rolled her shoulders, carefully, and found them unharmed and strong as ever.

The guards stepped forward, slowly and methodically, as she shuffled and scrambled away until her back was pressed against the steel side of the dome. The smaller man laughed through broken teeth, while the larger slid the point of his knife beneath her chin and drew it up to look at them. Her hands scrambled at the blade, closing around it helplessly.

"Any last words, bitch?"

Her hair fell away from her face, and he realised she was smiling.

"I was about to ask you the same question. Bitch."

Her fingers stiffened around the blunt edge of the hunting knife, and she shoved it back with all her strength, loosening the guard's grip. Before he could tighten his hold, she pulled it back towards her, flipping it between her knuckles and landing the handle into the palm of her waiting hand.

She darted forwards, slicing twice - once across his eyes, the other opening his throat.

The smaller man didn't have time to surrender before she settle her hands around his head, knife still in her grip, and wrenched his head around as if she were opening a sticky jar. His neck snapped like a sapling.

She kicked both corpses to make sure they were dead, then stripped them of their weapons and keys.

Allayne was somewhere on this boat - somewhere with little Eret, probably with the boy's father dead and drained on the floor. The attack was almost certainly Hiccup - Stormfly must have gotten home faster than she thought - but he didn't know about Allayne.

Could the whore have given her away? No - to do so would have risked her son and her lover, and she was smart enough not to believe any promises of their safety. Three months, she must have been on board - since they left Camant - without Astrid or Eret suspecting a thing. They must have taken her as soon as Eret left for the docks with Astrid and their son.

Astrid wouldn't leave her here to die in the attack.

She took a moment to asses the weapons - two hunting knives, one in each hand, and a sword slung across her back. Then she took a moment to assess herself, and decided it was best not to. The adrenalin pumping through her veins was enough to hide the acute pain she knew she should be feeling - her entire exposed midsection was stained with mottled brown and purple bruising, and her arms weren't much better. Plus she'd gained a healthy coating of blood over her shoulders and in her hair as she slit the first guard's throat. Her legs could carry her, and her arms could swing and stab and cut, and for now, that was enough.

She had to pass the rotting remains of the trap and Hiccup's leg to reach the steps and cogs that led to freedom. She skirted the edge of the dome, as far away from the gruesome remains as possible, keeping her eyes fixed on the dull light of dawn. She could still feel the maggots crawling in her gut, the heavy lump in the throat that she couldn't swallow, and she didn't know if she could ever reconcile what had happened, what she had eaten, with the man she had brought so much pain to, and loved in a way she couldn't comprehend.

She would probably die on this deck. But she would die on her own terms, with steel in her hands and blood on her skin and the knowledge that she had beaten death a thousand times, but she could only lose to it once.

However this ended, it ended **today.**

26. Brutal Men

"Well you certainly are hard to get rid of, I'll say that."

The voice was low, and sharp, and even though Drago spoke the words without turning to face him, Hiccup's heart seized to finally hear him speak.

He had been silent, all those months ago, watching with almost disinterest as Toothless tumbled to the deck of the ship, all plans for subtlety and stealth ruined by a single guard who'd decided to take a piss off one side of the ship when he should have been patrolling the other. Toothless had blasted through every rope they threw at him, but a steel bola had caught around his tail and snapped the freshly repaired rig in two, sending them plummeting to the surface of the sea. They'd been hauled aboard, poked and prodded, as if the guards who'd caught them couldn't quite believe what they had found. Hissed arguments still smelt like saltwater in his brain, the guards arguing as to whether they should wake Drago, and as the water had drained from his lungs, one of them had darted from his field of vision as the others restrained him. Toothless had snapped and snarled but his shot limit was exhausted, and he was powerless to stop the venom they injected through old Zippleback teeth that sent him into a stupor to be dragged away and caged.

His impression of Drago had always been one of enormity - a huge dark shape bent over him, distorted by pain and swallowed seawater. Silent, save for the occasional grunt. Always bent, or hunched, to look down at him. Driving his foot into Hiccup's side, slicing off two of his toes with agonising precision before the trap was found. Watching as the steel teeth bit into his foot and broke the bone and, as he screamed and begged that they spared Toothless, a low, dark laugh shaking the madman's body.

Drago had returned, every few days, to watch him waste away. Sometimes just watching, sometimes digging the sharp end of his bullhook into already abused flesh. Bringing foul food and smiling sickeningly as it was shoved down his throat by lesser soldiers. Hiccup's tongue automatically probed the gap in his mouth where a tooth had once been, before it was loosened in a beating and pried out with the point of that fucking bullhook, Drago looming over him with concentration and pleasure.

But now, standing tall, Hiccup could see Drago in a new light. Dark, certainly, dark as the gods below, but a man. Hardly larger than his father. And for all the pain he'd caused, he was human, and he would pay.

Drago didn't turn when Stoick thumped onto the deck, twenty paces behind him, or when Toothless landed with a snap of fangs and a snarl. It wasn't until Hiccup pulled his foot from the saddle, adjusting his prosthetic to a walking foot with practised speed, and landed on the deck that he even acknowledged they were there.

And hearing him speak sent a bolt of fear the likes of which he'd never felt through him. The blunt edge of his left leg throbbed with pain at the mere sight of the man who had taken it.

Drago still stood at the bow of the ship, looking out over the disturbed water, and gathered his despicable dragon skin cloak closer as he spoke. Hiccup drew his sword at the sound of his enemy's voice, and Toothless stiffened beside him, ready to strike.

He turned slowly, a gruesome gash of a smile across his face, when he noticed Stoick. He paused, processing the enormous chief coldly, then raised an eyebrow.

"A family trait."

He stepped down, onto the level deck, and paced casually closer. "Your father, I watched burn. Your dragon's kind, I had wiped out. Your mother - well, I thought I'd finished with her a hundred times before I finally beat the face from her skull. And your whore - she's probably wishing she were dead by now."

Toothless snarled, teeth sharp and fire building in his gut. To his left, Stoick mimicked the posture. Hiccup held out a hand, steadying both, before stepping forward. This revenge was his to

take.

His foot clacked against the wooden deck, and Drago smiled horribly.

"The son of Stoick the Vast - a cripple. What shame he must feel."

Stoick lunged forward, hammer first, and that was his mistake.

Without blinking, Drago whorled around, blocking the blow with the shaft of his bullhook and stepping to one side, leaving Stoick to lunge into empty air and fall, off balance. The chief leapt back to his feet, hammer still in hand, and Drago paused before holding out his arms in surrender.

"Your family are too easy to kill."

With a roar, Stoick charged, his hammer crashing into Drago's shoulder with the force to crack mountains.

"Go, Hiccup, go!"

Hiccup was rooted to the spot.

"Get the others while you can! It's over here!"

He shook his head, staring as Drago rose to his feet and shrugged off his metal arm, completely flattened by Stoick's blow.

Stoick turned, his eyes widening, as Drago drove his bullhook forward into Stoick's chest. Hiccup's heart lurched as his father looked down in shock, before pain exploded across his body as Drago's fist connected with the side of his head.

Hiccup stumbled back, somehow keeping his footing as Toothless leapt forward, knocking the madman to the deck and holding him there with a clawed foot to his throat. He had watched his rider suffer, and understood his need for revenge, but he would not look on as Hiccup died when he could so easily kill the man who had brought him so much pain.

He roared, roasting-hot breath pushing the hair and skin of Drago's face back, but the man's lips just twisted into a smile. Toothless knew smiles - he had seen them on Hiccup's face, warm and real and light and sarcastic, but never this cold and brutal.

He drew back, eyes flicking to where his rider was rolling his father to his feet and checking the damage that the weapon had left. There were frenzied cries and half sobs, and Toothless couldn't shake the memory of two years ago, Hiccup making the same desperate pleas to another parent's body.

"Hold him there bud!"

Toothless recognised the words directed to him, and pressed his claws further into the warlord's throat, relishing the smell of fresh blood.

"Dad... Dad!"

There was a groan of pain and the shifting of heavy flesh, before Toothless heard the laboured breaths.

"Finish this."

The voice was weak, but determined.

Then Hiccup was next to his dragon, a heavy warhammer in his hands, staring down at the man who had taken his world from him.

He wanted so much more. He wanted to tear Drago apart with his bare hands - to cut every piece of flesh from his body until his skin was nothing but strips of meat and his bones were chewed by dragons while his heart still beat within his chest. He wanted to recreated his weeks of torture, day by day - to find Astrid and to do double of whatever had happened to her to this bastard.

But his father was bleeding out on the deck and this battle weren't over - he could die before he reached a healer.

So it was with a heavy hand that he lowered the hammer to rest by Drago's face.

"I hope she finds you in the next life, to have the revenge she couldn't in this."

He raised the hammer, ready to drive into his face and turn the flesh to liquid, when Drago laughed. It started deep and slow, then rose and cracked as he let out a scream, wild and brutal.

Hiccup narrowed his eyes, and lifted the hammer higher, just as the surface of the deck lurched beneath him.

Drago shoved upwards, and Toothless was thrown off him with surprise and force, scattering to his feet at the edge of the deck. Enough. He was not waiting for ceremony this time.

The sting of flame was building in the dragon's throat when the surface of the sea shattered and his mind went blank.

* * *

><p>Ruffnut's leg was broken. She knew that much.<p>

The rest, she wasn't so certain about.

She had landed on one side, awkwardly, snapping her ankle as she hit the deck. Agony ripped through her body, and she had passed out for a good few seconds before coming back to her body and wishing she was unconscious again. Fuck, it was like having every knife in Midguard buried in her calf.

But she couldn't stay idle, caught on the side of the deck in the middle of a battle, so she ground her teeth together and pulled herself to her feet with the help of the heavy steel base of the dome she had landed next to.

Where ever she was, it was out of the action - there were no men running to battle stations and none on patrol duty either. She could feel the pounding feet of action somewhere - each step vibrated through the surface of the deck and sent shivers of pain through her already throbbing leg. She wiped the sweat from her brow and drew the knife she had strapped to her belt, and wondered what the fuck she was meant to do now.

The plan had gone to shit. Where ever Hiccup had heard that bonded dragons could resist whatever call sent them circling and and wheeling under their enemy's command, it was bullshit. Looking up, she could still see the thick cloud of dragons, and the occasional glimpse of a still burning Monsterous Nightmare. Shame really - she was just warming up to Worldburner.

Maybe once these ratfuckers were dead, she could find him again.

She was fairly certain she was on Drago's ship - the one Hiccup had sketched in the dirt - although she didn't have the first fucking clue what to do now she was there and her ankle was so many pieces of decorative cartilage. She leaned against the curved metal of the dome, when a flash of memory came back to her.

Domes..._Domes._

She scuttled along the side of the trap, looking for the mechanism Hiccup had mentioned. Astrid was in one of these. Brutal, take no shit Astrid, who would definitely know what to do. Or who might be lying dead in a pool of her own blood and piss. Either way, there would be Astrid.

She didn't want to think what Hiccup would do if Astrid were dead. He'd changed since he was tiny and useless - grown taller and sturdier and managed to steal an ass from the gods - but the way his eyes had glinted with fury when he'd landed and announced they were attacking to get Astrid back had sent ice into her bones. Whatever had happened to him over the past five years, Hiccup had gone from a clumsy boy to a powerful man, but whatever had happened between him and Astrid over the past six months was somehow stronger. When Stoick had stopped him on the cliff, she had almost feared for the chief to stand in front of such fury.

Ruffnut didn't believe in love or marriage - she had seen far too much evidence against it to believe that sharing a body and a bed caused some magical bond that couldn't be broken, had seen it that very night as she'd fought and pleaded with Snoutlout and he'd still scurried back to his father with his tail between his leg. But whatever Hiccup and Astrid had, they were both willing to die for it.

Her ankle screamed at her the entire time, but halfway around she found the mechanism. Cranking it meant planting both her feet on the ground and enduring the excruciating pain, but within three turns the top had receded enough for her to clamber up the side (with the now-rhythmic pained throbs of her ankle) and drop into the dome.

The guard was also as surprised to see her as she was him.

She didn't waste time though. He was dead on the floor before she even had time to check the captives, who were... definitely not Astrid. There was a woman, but she was slender and her skin was so blood-soaked it took a moment for Ruff to even realise she was naked. Her heart seized for a moment, but it wasn't Astrid - her hair was too long and her eyes were slanted. The tiny body she clutched to her side wasn't Astrid either - a boy of around four, shrinking behind his mother's hip. There was a man on the floor in front of them, and for a moment Ruff thought they're already killed another guard, but a wheezing breath broke the silence and she realised he was still alive.

It took a moment to realise the woman was staring at her.

"Astrid?"

Ruff blinked and reeled. "No. Ruffnut."

The woman's face broke into relief. "Ruffnut!"

Ruff nodded slowly, approaching step by careful step before the woman lunged at her, wrapping her arms pitifully around Ruff's waist and sobbing. Some of the blood blurred into her furs, and at close inspection she could see the woman's wrists were bent at unseemly angles and her fingers were broken.

"Where's Astrid?"

Ruff shook her head. "I was about to ask you that."

The boy hovered uncertainly behind his mother, not willing or ready to join a stranger's embrace.

"She's in the other cell."

His voice was thin and cracked, and he winced as he spoke, the words opening a tender wound along his throat.

"Who are you?"

The woman leaned back onto her knees, trying to wipe tears from her cheeks and only smearing more blood along them. "Allayne. Friend. Astrid. Hiccup." She pointed at the child. "Eret. Son." Pointed at the man on the floor. "Eret. Father."

Ruff nodded slowly, with no idea what was happening. She was turning to clamber back over the side of the dome and leave the mad, blood-soaked woman until the end of the battle when she was suddenly thrown into shade.

A figure stood on the edge of the mechanism. Tall, bruised, battered, but alive. Almost as stained with blood as the mad woman on the floor, wearing just bindings and leggings and holding two knives.

Astrid.

She looked down at Ruff like something holy, then squinted past her.

"Allayne?"

The mad woman choked at the sight of her. Her gaze shifted from the woman and child to the man on the deck.

"Is he alive?"

The woman nodded shakily. Astrid's eyes narrowed.

"Ruff, stay here. Keep him alive. Keep them all alive."

Then she disappeared, falling backwards as the entire ship shifted and tossed to one side.

* * *

><p>It emerged from the sea with a force and strength that could defy the gods.<p>

Hiccup had seen a Bewilderbeast before - the alpha species, the king of all dragons - but his mother's companion had been a benevolent ruler. It had used its size to haul in catches of fish for the hatchlings too small to hunt or the dragons that had been maimed by Drago's traps. It had built a kingdom with its icy breath, and called dragons to it as friends, not slaves. He had only once seen it use its willpower against another being, and that had been one of Drago's armoured dragons which had crashed into their sanctuary, half mad and homicidal - the alpha had asserted its dominance and taken control of the slit eyed beast, and released it as soon as Valka had chipped off its armour and smoothed her calming hands over its skin.

This creature was nothing like what Hiccup knew.

It was younger, smaller than the Alpha it had killed - yet its tusks were sharp and its eyes were merciless. Even being smaller, it dwarfed the ship - with its eyes sitting level with the deck, its tallest, red tipped head spines reached above the masts of any surrounding ships. Where Valka's Bewilderbeast was startlingly white with clear green eyes, this creature seemed stained all over with grey, from its skin to its tusks to the dull eyes that stared down at Drago like a waiting dog. It hovered in the water, barely above the surface, its mouth like a gash and its tusks ramming into the side of the vessel and thrusting it back through the water.

And finally, Hiccup saw where the chains that bracketed the ship went - into collars around the beast's tusks.

It was as much as captive as any of them.

He fell back and sprawled across the deck as the ship dropped back into the water, settling itself with heaving rocks. The hammer had been knocked from his grip, and he barely avoided Drago's arm as it slammed back into the deck half a foot from him. Toothless had skittered back, but Hiccup couldn't tell if it was from the force of the ship's displacement or the push of something far stronger from the Bewilderbeast's presence. His father had fallen back - far back, to where a dozen soldiers waited and grabbed him, forcing him to his knees.

Drago barely moved.

He climbed to his feet and held out a hand to the soldiers. "Leave him. He is mine to kill."

One of the soldiers - a captain, or general - lowered the sword he held ready at Stoick's throat, and pressed it against his already bloody chest.

"Your mother was an idealist, boy. Do you know what else an idealist is?" He leaned down and hissed the words. "A fool. A fucking fool."

He scooped his bullhook from the ground and straightened, pointing the tip at Toothless. "This beast is nothing more than an animal. He is not smart, or kind, or your friend. He is part of the food chain. We are part of the food chain. And there can only be one apex predator."

Hiccup struggled to his feet, trying to ignore the ache in his side and the unsteadiness of his false leg.

"You're wrong. Dragons aren't mindless animals or tools of war. They are kind, amazing creatures that want peace, for everyone. But we keep fighting them, and they keep defending themselves, and men like you use them to conquer." His eyes narrowed. "My mother knew that. I know that. And if you have to kill every human who learns that dragons are more than what they thought to rule the world, you'll have a sad world to rule."

He straightened, finally secure on the deck, and stood tall. "I would say dragons are just like humans, but I know too many brutal men. They're better than us, in almost every way, and we should be honoured that they would bring us together."

Drago snorted. "How many men have you seen torn apart by dragons, boy?"

"Not half as many as I've seen killed by your armies. Men and dragons. Will you conquer until there's no one left to kill?"

"No! I will conquer until this world is free from the tyranny of dragons!"

"And you'll lead it with the tyranny of men."

Drago's eyes narrowed. "You're a clever boy, Hiccup. But you're a fool, just like your mother. And just like her, I will have to show you what dragons can do."

He screamed again, harsh and terrifying, and turned to the Bewilderbeast, swinging the bullhook around his head and smashing it into the deck, splintering the wood.

The Bewilderbeast - the alpha species, the king of all dragons - flinched.

And in this beast's fear, Hiccup found twice as much to be scared of. Drago Bludvist had made his alpha a slave through fear - and what had it taken to make this god of dragons fear a mere man? But for all the fear striking deep within him, Hiccup couldn't help a spike of pity for the creature.

The alpha's head lowered in the water, angling down towards him, and Hiccup felt totally exposed - until he realised he was not the subject of the piercing gaze.

Toothless' ears quivered, and his pupils became slit, as his mind faded to nothing but the will to obey.

27. Good Dragons

"Toothless?"

The breath of the dragon was scorching on Hiccup's face, even from a distance, leaking out the side of his open jaws. He could feel the fire building in Toothless' throat, the fire he'd felt the first time he'd met his best friend - when Toothless pinned him to the ground and stared him down and let out a roar that singed his eyebrows and left him with no doubt of what the Night Fury was capable of. In the five years since, Hiccup had felt that breath countless times - warm and comforting, reassuring, stinging as the final blast glancing by his side and shooting in tandem into the funeral ship he'd built his own mother. In five years, he had never once felt threatened by it.

But now, as Toothless stared at him with unblinking eyes, he realised exactly how deadly his best friend could be.

The Bewilderbeast loomed over it all, blocking out the tender new rays of dawn and leaving them in deep shadow.

Drago lowered the point of his weapon in a wordless command, and the Bewilderbeast obeyed, dipping its head in the ocean and narrowing its eyes. Hiccup felt the deck shift beneath him, but he didn't process it - couldn't process anything beyond the blank eyes of his best friend.

"Toothless? Bud, you gotta fight this!"

The Night Fury's head twitched to one side, his eyes blinking rapidly. He twitched again, sharp and jerky, as if shaking a thought from his head. The Bewilderbeast hummed low in its throat, and suddenly Toothless stopped fighting - instead his shoulders dropped and his eyes fell open before twisting his entire body to face Hiccup.

"You live by the dragon, boy. It's only fitting you should die by one too."

He could hear his father's laboured breaths, the calm footsteps of Drago along the deck, the squirming of a dozen soldiers thirsting for blood. The Bewilderbeast snorted, low and heavy, and he felt the air around him shift and chill at the icy beast's breath.

"And what sweeter death than at the hands of a friend?"

Toothless dropped to the deck, his stance low and balanced, and entirely animalistic. Yet there was something beyond his control in the movements - stiff and jerky, like a puppet. There was no menace in his movements, no anger - just blind obedience.

"Toothless!"

The dragon paused, as if fighting its very nature, and shook its head. But it kept advancing.

Was this how Valka had died? Watching as the most loyal of her dragons surrounded her and crowded in with blank stares and deadly claws? No - she had been killed by Drago's hand, after watching everything she had taken away from her.

Just as he would.

Everything he had was on this ship. His father, so recently reunited and so quickly dispatched, to be killed by Drago's own hand as soon as Hiccup was gone, if he didn't first bleed out on the deck. Astrid, pleading for her life somewhere - no, she would not plead. She would either be fighting her captors with silence, or have killed them herself. He let a faint glimmer of hope blossom that she was alive, and escaped, and making her way as far from this ship that stunk of death and decay.

His best friend, staring at him with murder in his eyes.

"Do you see what a dragon is now? Do you see what they will do?"

"What they can be forced to do under the control of madmen!"

Drago laughed, long and low. "Hiccup, there is no other kind of man."

He rammed the point of his bullhook into the deck, yelling with all his might, and the Bewilderbeast echoed him with a bone shattering roar. Hiccup felt the shockwave of his clatter his teeth and the stinging cold of the Alpha's air against his skin.

Toothless dropped lower, and opened his jaw.

* * *

><p>Astrid moved with the speed and silence of a spirit, the adrenaline pumping through her veins masking the excruciating pain she knew she should be feeling. Allayne was alive, and (relatively) safe, but something far worse had risen from the sea.<p>

She felt the shadow rising, heard the torrents of water as they slipped from the Alpha's skin, but she didn't see the beast until she broke through the edge of the domes and took it in in all its enormity.

She had imagined a beast the size of a ship. She couldn't comprehend the dragon before her, as large as an island.

And it was glaring down at Hiccup, and Toothless, and threatening to destroy everything she loved.

The plan must have gone to shit - of course it had, the second she'd been found out, but whatever counter attack Hiccup had launched must have failed too. Ruffnut had been without a dragon, and she was almost relieved to see Toothless before he turned to Hiccup with glowing jaws.

She needed to help. She needed a plan. She needed to cleave Drago's head from his shoulders and gut that Bewilderbeast with her bare hands.

But standing closer, only a few dozen paces to her left, was a troop of soldiers, Posen at their command. He was bending over something, a beast of some sort, sword drawn, watching and waiting for Drago's command.

Hiccup couldn't attack, pinned down by Toothless. But if she were to intervene, she'd be cut down by an entire company of armed thugs before she was within a hundred feet of her love and her enemy.

She needed a plan.

Drago was saying something, in that low, terrifying voice, but she blocked it out, surveying the surface of the ship for something, anything she could use. She felt like she was freshly twenty all over again, stuck in a steep walled cove with a man she didn't know she would come to love, searching for any kind of escape. Only now, she searched to attack, to join the fray and leave with gore beneath her fingernails and revenge in her heart.

There were the dragon traps, and the stout railings along the side of the ship, and the heavy chains that had once drilled into the sea and now hung limp above it, connecting the Alpha to his master. Her eyes followed the chains, to where they were secured by the mast, only she couldn't -

Up. She needed to go up.

The cloud of dormant dragons circling the ship was close, but not close enough to block out the spiderweb of ropes connecting across the masts and traps of the ship, interlocked and woven with handholds. Barely thirty feet in front of her, with the soldiers directly in her path.

She flexed her fingers around the grips of her knives, and stole forward.

She was lucky, really, that Drago chose a second later to unhinge his jaw and scream like a conjurer. It masked the sound of one knife slashing across an exposed throat and the other severing a spine.

She had opened three more necks before the trope even noticed her presence, and the first blow hit her as she dispatched her fifth kill - a gash opened across her wrist, tearing the flesh and spurting blood, but she didn't feel it. She rammed a knife through the mouth of her attacker and left it where it lay, drawing the sword from her back and cleaving another soldier's head from his shoulders.

She was the picture of fury as each soldier fell, one by one as her strikes grew harder and faster, until all that remained was Posen, bent over the beast she had seen before. She turned to him, a weapon each hand, mouth twisted into a snarl.

"Drop it, cunt," he hissed, "or I kill him."

The beast moved, moaning in pain, and she started in horror to realise it was Stoick's body, with Posen's sword pressed to the base of his neck. His hammer lay by Posen's feet, the metal unstained with blood or gore. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she noticed the Bewilderbeast was still roaring.

She tightened her grip on her sword, and steadied her stance. "If you think I value his life, prepare to lose yours."

Posen lifted the sword a millimetre, ready to plunge down, and that was his mistake. By the time his arm moved downwards, it was severed at the shoulder.

Astrid grinned viciously, pulling her sword out from the mess she had made of his shoulder and plunging it through his chest and out the other side - still pushing as he fell to the deck and the sword cut through the wood and stuck in a beam, pinning him there like a butterfly. Screaming, bleeding, but alive.

"Remember my promise," she hissed, before straightening and grabbing Stoick's hammer, dropping it by the chief's side.

"Find a use for that," she said, before dropping her knife and grabbing a rope and clambering up into the ship's sails.

* * *

><p>He could hardly hear his own thoughts through the blood curdling screams of Drago and his Alpha.<p>

But above all of it, he knew one thing.

Toothless took a slow, reptilian step forward, his mouth hanging open, teeth bared for all the world to see.

"Toothless!"

There was no response in the luminous green eyes - only mindless obedience.

"Bud, you ****can**** fight this!"

He took another step forward - Hiccup took one back, careful to back towards the soldiers rather than Drago. He trusted the soldiers' fear of their commander far more than the sharp end of Drago's staff. As soon as he stepped back though, Toothless stalked forward again, his wings half unfurling to hang around his body, making him seem larger, more wild and uncontrolled. There was no finesse in his movement, none of the years of flying and careful co-ordination that usually informed his motions. Hiccup knew that if the Alpha commanded Toothless to fly, the Night Fury

would do so without remembering his own injuries and inability.

There was some kind of noise coming from the other side of the deck, but he couldn't think of that, not now.

"This isn't you, Toothless."

Another prowling step forwards. Another cautious step back.

You can't keep running.

Had he said that? Or had she? Or had it been the meaning of every moment they'd had, the true reason that fate had crashed them back together? For so long, it had been so easy to run - with Toothless by his side and nothing to tie them to the ground, no reason to ever return to one place, no need to stay. He had been running and turning his back his entire life, from his people, his home, his mother, his duty.

But he would not run from his best friend.

He planted his foot on the deck, and held out his hand, palm open.

"Please, Toothless."

He thought he saw a flicker of recognition in the dragon's eyes - a slit of black dilating, then shrinking back again at a rumble of the Alpha's throat.

"You're my best friend."

He straightened his elbow, hand hovering less than a foot from Toothless' nose. He could feel the flesh of his palm blistering in the heat emanating from between the dragon's jaws, but he held firm.

Then stepped forward, and placed his palm on Toothless' snout.

"My best friend."

There was a roar to his side, a yell from Drago to demand more from his enslaved Alpha, but Hiccup didn't hear it. All he could do was feel was the cool, scaly skin beneath his fingers - so cool compared to the fire in his jaws - and watch as the slits of Toothless' pupils widened, and flattened out, and became what he knew.

The dragon squinted, confused, and tossed his head as if shaking the very thought of killing from his mind.

"Toothless!"

His teeth retracted, and his mouth split into a gummy smile.

"No!"

Hiccup ducked instinctively as Drago lunged forward, bullhook first, driving it into the deck with a scream to the Alpha. Toothless stiffened beside him, curling into his rider with the only display of fear the dragon would ever show - to turn to Hiccup, who he trusted with everything, and beg an answer.

"Fight back!"

Hiccup's hand was closed around a sword that he doubted he could use, and he could feel a blast building in Toothless' throat, but he knew it would be too late and—

She dropped from the mast like a lightening bolt thrown by the gods, driving her feet into Drago's shoulders and her Zippleback tooth pendant into his neck.

The pin shattered on impact, the point puncturing Drago's jugular and leaving a path of no resistance for the venom. A thin green liquid exploded out from the tooth, finally free after so long, and flooded into his veins, thinning the blood it encountered and sending his pulse racing, pumping the poison deeper and deeper into his body.

They both crashed to the deck with the force of the blow, Drago's head cracking sickeningly

against the wood, the bullhook knocked from his grip.

Astrid landed neatly over him, the cracked base of the pin still in her hand, still stabbing the last of the poison into the body of the hated man.

Hiccup didn't to know whether to believe she was real.

She jumped down from her perch on Drago's collapsed back and kicked his side, rolling him over with her foot to stare upwards. His eyes bulged, darting from side to side, and his body began to quiver slightly, gooseflesh rising on his skin. His mouth hung open, a trail of spit and blood leaking from the corner. She bent over him, narrowing her eyes, then nodded, satisfied, and turned away.

She picked up the fallen bullhook, and held it out to Hiccup.

No words were needed. He took it from her, making sure to graze his hand against her to ensure she was real and this wasn't some kind of final wish fulfilment fantasy before he was finally pulled into the underworld. The heat of her palm - slippery with blood from a wound on her wrist and the thin green venom - told him enough.

She stood aside, giving him space, but still close enough for him to feel her presence. Toothless stood beside him, at the same distance, crooning softly. He bent over Drago, over the man who had taken his mother and her dragons and countless other innocent lives, pathetic and twitching on the deck.

He raised the bullhook over his head, and brought it crashing down into Drago's skull.

The blow hit with a snap and a crack and a sharp, wet squelch, but he didn't check to see if the man was dead - instead, he lifted the staff again, bringing it back down with equal force. There was the same sound, slightly muffled this time, but it didn't stop him. He slammed the weapon into the deck again and again, from a lower height each time, his muscles stinging with the effort of killing this man. After the first dozen blows, the cracking sound stopped. After twenty, he felt the vibrations of the deck beneath his feet, and realised he was hitting wood.

And still, he didn't stop.

They moved together, as he raised the staff for what felt like the thousandth and the first time, both leaning in from either side to bracket him and ground him with scaly skin and bloody fingertips digging into his arm.

"Hiccup."

Still he tried to lift the staff again.

"Hiccup!"

She grabbed his chin, and he felt something sharp in her slippery palm as she turned his head forcefully to the east.

The Bewilderbeast still hovered above them, watching with eyes the size of houses.

Its gaze was fixed on the destruction he had wrought to Drago's body, on what was left of the man who had caused it so much torment, and Hiccup's hands tightened around the shaft of the bullhook before he remembered what this beast had done.

It had gutted the kindly Alpha of his mother's home. It had taken control of their dragons, of all their dragons, left him at the mercy of mad men more than once. It used its power as the alpha to ruin and wreck and leave destruction in its wake.

He dropped the staff, and placed his hand on Toothless' flank. The dragon stepped forward with him, Astrid following by his side, as he mounted the ramp to the edge of the bow and the Bewilderbeast's gaze.

It stared at them with indifference, but it didn't try to take control of Toothless. Instead, its sight kept shifting back to the bloody mess that was once its masters.

Good dragons under the control of bad people do bad things._

It had been his mother's mantra, her explanation for every ill a dragon ever caused, from the

destruction of Berk to the desolation of her new home. She had always fought his demands that what they needed was an army, to go on the attack, more fearful of taking one innocent life than losing her own a thousand times over.

The chains shifted as the alpha turned back to them and, with slow resignation, closed its eyes.

She wasn't afraid of fire, but she feared it would burn what she loved.

His hand settled on Toothless' flank, and without words, the dragon knew what he wanted. He could feel the heat stinging his cheek as it built in Toothless' throat - a concentrated blast of purple fire that could cut through steel and stone and flesh.

His fingers shifted ever so slightly, and the bolt was released.

He could feel Astrid flinch beside him - feel the sea shift as the Bewilderbeast dropped in the water, expecting the worst. Another shot was fired, as strong as the first but in the other direction, and it too hit its mark.

The ship shifted as the great chains on its bow, so used to holding the weight of the ancient dragon, were broken by the Night Fury's fire.

The beast didn't react at first. It was still right up until one of the chains smacked into the water with an almightily crack and a spray of salt. But when its eyes did open, it looked down at them with disbelieving gratitude.

Hiccup was dimly aware of the sky lightening, as the cloud of dragons circling the ship under the alpha's command disbanded, heading for the sky and freedom away from the stink of death. Instead, he kept his gaze fixed on the bloodshot eyes of the Alpha, as it gave something like a nod, then sank back into the sea from which it came.

The ship rocked dangerously as the dragon displaced a million gallons of seawater, and he fell backwards, tumbling into the deck in a heap with Astrid, grabbing for her to steady him and finding her equally unstable. She landed on top of him, knocking the air from his lung and crying out in pain as the hand she had flung out smacked into the wood of the deck and pain rocketed through her body.

"Astrid?"

She rolled off of him, still pressed into the deck, and he leaned in, wanting so desperately to kiss her and hold her and make love right then and there on the deck because she was alive and real and beautiful and she had saved him life a thousand times over—

Her cry of pain turned to a sob, and his heart dropped.

On closer inspection - now that the fury was gone - she was a mess. Her arm was gushing blood, her hair matted with it, her stomach and ribs stained purple and black with a thick layer of bruises and the occasional cut. She had lost her shirt and skirt, left in just bindings and leggings and bare feet, and in that moment, finally free from the burden of revenge, she looked more beautiful to him than anything.

She drew her right arm in close to her chest, cradling it, but she didn't stop him taking it in his hands and holding her palm up to the light.

"Astrid."

The poisonous pin had shattered on impact, but Drago's neck wasn't the only thing it had broken into. There were four sharper shards of tooth buried in the skin of her palm, a sticky sheen of green coating everything.

"Your father—"

The words were broken, choked, and he looked over his shoulder to where she gestured and saw Stoick curled in pain on the deck, surrounded by a dozen dead soldiers and one live one, skewered to the deck with a sword through his gut.

"Kill him."

He looked down at her in shock, then realised she was pointing at the living soldier - judging by his garb, their leader, some kind of general.

"Kill him for me."

Her voice was weak and thin, her eyes beginning to shift frantically. The poison was quick.

"Not if it kills you."

He was dimly aware of other dragons landing on the deck - Skullcrusher and Worldburner, in search of their riders. He could see Skullcrusher bundling Stoick into his claws from high above, as he and Toothless shot through the air, Astrid shaking in his arms and her mouth beginning to drip blood.

"Astrid! Don't you fucking dare!"

They were the only words he could remember from his rescue, the only thing that stuck out in the two weeks of hazy pain he had locked away in his memory from his capture to release. She had yelled them to him from the air, on a much slower dragon, as he bled out beneath her, quietly pleading with the gods that had ignored him for one more day to live.

She smiled thinly at the words, too harsh in his mouth, but her grip on his arm loosened.

"I love you."

Her voice was lost to the wind, the words barely making it past her lips, and he prayed that his tears would mean something as they were lost to the wind too.

28. Sacrifices

"So she's really gone?"

Hiccup nodded slightly, flicking his gaze out to sea.

"Completely? As in—"

"Gone, Snoutlout. She's gone."

His cousin lowered his gaze slightly, looking at Hiccup's boots. Hiccup noticed his downturned look and softened slightly. Of all the things he'd ever thought even slightly within the realm of possibility, his cousin siding with him hadn't been one of them. Over the past three weeks of heated negotiation and arguing, splitting the village neatly in two, the two constants he'd had were Toothless and Snoutlout. His father had been confined to his bed, Gobber refusing to leave his side, and at first all meetings took place in the hall, with Fishlegs hurriedly transcribing every bitter word for Stoick to read once he woke. When the chief had finally come out of his herb-induced stupor, he had demanded all further mediation take place at his bedside.

It wasn't easy. Half of Berk still thought Hiccup was a traitor, even if the ships on the horizon had been turned back and those who had attacked and bonded with their dragons returned with plunder that turned even the most Viking-ly of them green with envy. At best, he was the pathetic, useless son he'd been all those years ago - at worst, he was their mortal enemy.

But the island, and the tribe, owed him. Three boatloads of soldiers, conscripted to help repair Berk's harbour and docks in exchange for pardons, were quick to spread the news of what Drago had planned for Berk - and then not even Spitelout could deny that Hiccup had saved them.

A blood debt was not something to be taken lightly.

At first, Hiccup's list of requests had been beaten down at every turn - until his final demand was made. At that point, Snoutlout had risen from his seat beside the empty chief's chair - he refused to take Stoick's place, even if he was officially acting chief - and moved to stand beside Hiccup. His voice had been strong but his hands shook as he stood in bold defiance of his father.

"If these are Hiccup's terms," he announced to the Council, "we must accept them, and consider him generous."

With those words, half a dozen villagers who had been watching the proceedings had stood with him. Over the next weeks, the numbers on each side had swelled until the entire village was crowded into the hall, split evenly down the middle. Once Stoick woke, however, the negotiations were reduced to the most important parties, and the rest of the village were sent back to work.

After two week though, it was starting to take a toll on Hiccup. When he wasn't arguing with the Council, in those first few days, he was overseeing the repatriation of the troops who had surrendered to Berk, and the punishment of the generals and captains who had openly defied them. He arrived every morning at dawn with Toothless, shooting in from the south and disappearing back in the same direction each night. Rumours began to fly that at night, Hiccup became a dragon himself while Toothless lost his wings and became a man. Regardless of what happened, he was always back by sunrise, the shadows under his eyes becoming darker each day.

Spitelout, and two Council members, sat on the opposite side of Stoick's bed to Hiccup and his dragon, Snoutlout and Gobber hovering by the headboard. Stoick had listened patiently to the demands, then sighed heavily, the sound mixed with pain. He had rejected willow bark and poppy brews to keep his mind clear, but the pain was almost clouding it as much as the herbs.

"Hiccup, you agree to these terms?"

"I proposed them."

"And Spitelout, you've got your balls in a twist because of what?"

Spitelout started. "Because I'm a reasonable Viking! We Berkians are a proud people, and we will not--"

"We will not be dictated to by a bastard with no claim of his own to the throne," Gobber interjected. "The Council is meant to mediate the chief's demands, not be mediated by the chief himself."

"We will** not **have dragons on our soil."

"Then you can leave."

Hiccup was shocked by his father's blunt response. He had expected begrudging acceptance, at best - yet here his father was, struggling to sit straight and defending dragons with the little breath he had.

"The Council are already to be cycled back into civilian roles, as per Hiccup's debt, and you yourselves are to be removed from your seats. You have no other reason to stay, since you sold your fields to buy the Council. So if you cannot live with dragons, you can live elsewhere."

Hiccup could feel Toothless looming close beside him - not understanding the words, but knowing their meaning. Skullcrusher had met them at the entrance to the chief's house, where he had stood on guard since he'd brought the bleeding chief back to his home and watched as healers hurried him inside to fill with prayers and herbs. Skullcrusher certainly wasn't the most affectionate of dragons - but Stoick wasn't the most affectionate of people, and keeping watch and leaving those who knew healing to do what they knew best was as close to a declaration of love as the dragon could make. He had greeted Hiccup and Gobber with a snuffle and a raised chin, and Snoutlout with an indifferent flick of the head, while Spitelout and the Councils had entered to open snarls.

Spitelout scowled. "You need me Stoick."

"I don't deny it. But I'd be a dead man if it weren't for the dragon at my door, so for now, he comes first."

"And the succession?"

It was one of the Councillors who asked, looking from Hiccup and Toothless to Snoutlout, then back again.

"It's covered in my terms," Hiccup said bluntly, looking towards the door. "If the chief accepts them, I'll leave immediately."

Stoick sighed heavily and looked up at Hiccup. "I won't say I'd have thought of this, son. But if it's what you feel is best..."

"It is. It has to be."

In the edge of his vision, Stoick caught a glimpse of Snoutlout giving Hiccup an imperceptible nod.

"As chief I can pardon your actions."

Hiccup shook his head. "I've asked enough of this village already. I'll take the punishment I've earned."

He could still hear the screams echoing around the tiny cells of Berk's prison - the cracking of bones and the sawing of steel into flesh. The first of his requests to be enacted, with his cousin by his side, before his father had even woken.

"Very well. These terms will be enacted once you've left."

He nodded, then looked to his uncle and the Councillors. "I'd like a moment alone with my father."

Spitelout scoffed. "So you can kill another unarmed man?"

Gobber practically growled. "You'll keep a civil tongue if you don't want me to pry it from between your teeth."

Snoutlout stood and clapped a hand to Stoick shoulder, holding it in respectful silence, before moving to the door.

"Can we trust him alone?"

"He won't be." Gobber pulled a stool to the bedside and sat heavily. That was enough to sway the Councillors and, with a reluctant scowl, Spitelout left the room.

"You did the right thing son."

Hiccup didn't bother to hide the naked shock and pride in his face at his father's words.

"I did what I could."

"No. You did what you had to. There is a world of difference, son."

Stoick shifted to sit up fully against the headboard - Gobber moved his pillows automatically to accommodate the movement and support his chief. The twinge of guilt Hiccup had felt at leaving while his father still recovered was both ached and soothed by the fact that his mentor would take far better care of Stoick than he ever could.

With his back straight, the chief looked down at his son once again, and clapped a hand to his shoulder.

"When next I see you, I want to see you with a happy wife. "

Hiccup snorted, and blinked away tears.

"An official one. Find some far off place that will give you a parchment with fancy ink as proof. Then, maybe, you can bring me some more heirs."

Stoick the Vast had never been the sort for hugs - but his wife Valka had been. It was in her spirit that Hiccup surged forward and wrapped his arms around his father's torso, hands barely able to meet on the other side. Stoick stiffened, the hug putting weight on his injuries, but after a moment, he relaxed, and held his son close.

"She's resting now. Peacefully. Because of you."

"Because of Astrid," Hiccup corrected, breaking the hug. He stood, putting a hand on Toothless' side automatically, and tried to find the words for such a heavy goodbye.

"Don't die of infection tomorrow," he finally said. "That'd be a sad way to go."

The corner of Stoick's mouth twisted into a smile, before Gobber smacked him in the arm.

"What sort of healers do you think we have? You're the one who's going to scrape your foot on a nail and die of sepsis in two months."

He was nearly out the door before Gobber yelled out to him.

"Don't forget what you left in the forge!"

"Wouldn't dream of it!"

He was hardly through the frame when his cousin accosted him from where he'd been waiting, flanked by Hookfang. But for all his bravado, Snoutlout didn't seem to have a word to say. He opened his mouth, then closed it, then followed Hiccup to the forge in silence, dragon trailing behind him.

"So she's really gone?"

Hiccup was pulling a cloth wrapped package from beneath a bench when Snoutlout finally spoke. He nodded, and his eyes shifted to the sea on reflex.

"Completely? As in—"

"Gone, Snoutlout. She's gone."

He found a length of rope to secure the package to Toothless' saddle - it was too big for the saddlebags - and started threading it through the small metal loops.

"So you definitely haven't seen her since the battle?"

Hiccup groaned and dropped the rope.

"I haven't seen Ruffnut since I took off, Lout. I might not have even seen her then - I kinda had other things on my mind."

"But her dragon came back to her, right?"

"Yeah, sure, so did everyone's."

"And there were some soldiers who said they saw her?"

Hiccup shrugged. "They saw a blonde woman with braids - that might not have been her."

"A blonde with braids riding a Nightmare - it has to be!"

Hiccup tried not to roll his eyes. "Sure, Lout, whatever you want to believe." He tied off the last knot and looked up to his cousin. "But if she's out there, and she has a dragon, why would she come back?"

It was the first time Snoutlout had been asked the question, and it floored him.

"But... but - "

"Why?"

He kicked a bench and swore. "She has to!"

Hiccup shook his head. "No she doesn't."

He was about to swing into his saddle before he heard the question, low and almost unspoken - and he wondered if Snoutlout meant to ask it at all.

"Why did Astrid come back?"

"Because she had to."

"And Ruff doesn't?"

He sighed heavily. "Astrid came back to stop a war - are there any wars Ruffnut's planning on ending any time soon?"

Snoutlout laughed, short and sharp. "Starting one maybe."

They lapsed into silence, and Hiccup was about to signal Toothless to leave, when Snoutlout spoke again.

"That general. _Allayne_. Is she...?"

It wasn't a question with an answer, so he didn't give one.

"And Astrid, she..."

He left the sentence hanging again, leaving Hiccup without a question to answer.

"He deserved it."

Hiccup nodded that time.

There was a crack, somewhere off to the east, as another roof collapsed under the weight of an adopted Nadder - the sound seemed to shock Snoutlout back to his senses. He straightened, hardened his jaw, and held a hand up and out to Hiccup.

"Til you come back?"

Hiccup nodded, and clasped the offered hand. "When I come back."

It was only once they were high in the clouds, speeding away from Berk, that he allowed himself to smile.

* * *

><p>She wasn't really aware when she finally woke.<p>

She drifted in and out of consciousness for so long, dreams and reality blurring into one as the herbs they'd smoked around her turned harsh normality into technicolour. She knew she was in pain, but she couldn't feel the pain itself, only knew the fact that she should feel it. It was like knowing it was raining outside and being wrapped in blankets under a thick roof, listening to the storm without feeling any consequence.

People came and went, although which of those were real she couldn't say. She knew them all, and tried to speak with each, and eventually she could tell the real and imagined apart by whether they spoke back. The real people would just nod sympathetically and start moving her body, checking bruises and cuts and digging cold fingers into colder skin, wrapping and unwrapping wounds. The imagined would sit and understand her. She could hear the real people talking about her, making decisions about medicine and sleep and whether they should just leave her to die, but they never asked her opinion, so she never gave it.

Some of them spoke at her, if not to her. Women, mostly - a woman healer who dully informed her of every action she was about to do before prodding and poking her. A different woman, more vicious and familiar, with long blonde braids, who sat by her bed and prattled off long stories as she drank tansy-root tea and cursed her own foolishness before leaving one day and never returning. An older, kinder woman with streaks of grey at her temples, who spoke soft words in a strange accent and felt like the closest thing she had to a mother.

The only one who never spoke was the man who appeared each night once the sun was down, to hold her hands in his and press his lips to her bandages and whisper prayers through the darkness. She was dimly aware that he shouldn't be there - that he snuck in without the healers knowing, but the two other invalids stretched out on their own pallets seemed to either not notice or not mind. He spoke to them, sometimes, although the woman only spoke in single, harsh words and the man could hardly speak at all. She realised slowly they were lovers, sharing one pallet as soon as the healers were gone, curled together protectively. Some days, her man brought a child with him, and the boy would leave him to hold her hand and would instead snuggle between the two recovering lovers - they only hugged each other closer, creating an illusion of safety that they all had to believe in.

She knew it meant little, but the hands that held hers gave her the same piece of mind.

Her mind was still hazy when the lovers left, one day, and didn't return.

Her man kept coming, every night without fail. She knew without question that he was hers, and she was his, but she couldn't remember his name, or even her own. But he became the moon to her, an endless and unchanging source of light as the sun slipped below the horizon, disappearing with the morning light.

She wasn't sure when she became aware of sensation across her body, but one day she finally realised that she was lying on a hard wooden bed, naked and sandwiched between two thin cotton sheets. At first, she didn't realise because so much of her body was cacooned in bandages that it

felt like a constricting second skin, but as the weeks wore on, the healers took them off one by one, deeming her skin saved and leaving it to breathe the early spring air. Her skin itself was mottled, dark and purple, mostly along her ribs and stomach, although her jaw still ached in the mornings and one of her arms was so thickly bandaged from underarm to fingertip that she worried they would never take it off.

She was right, in a way, because two days later she was wrapped up in one of her sheets and moved from the healing hut to somewhere familiar with slatted wooden walls that smelt of old flames and metal - still with the bandages thick around her arm. She was worried her man wouldn't find her in whatever this new place was, but once the sun set and he appeared, she realised that this was the right place for him to be - the right place for her to be. She drifted in and out of sleep, more comfortable in this new place, where the grey haired woman checked her wounds and removed more and more of the cloth around her arm, until she could see the swollen black flesh peeking above the bandages like a curse.

It was the smell which finally roused her, fully. Burning sulfur and pollen, and dry, scaly skin. Ash and leather and sweat.

"Okay, you can come in, but don't bump her, okay?"

It was her man's voice, somewhere outside, pulling the door open wide to let in the huge, shadowed beast hovering behind him. _Dragon, _her mind breathed - the beast was a dragon, blue as the sky with spines like light, and -

It all hit home.

"Stormfly?"

Her voice was rusty, unused - she hadn't uttered a full word in weeks. She didn't even recognise the word when it escaped her lips, but the dragon heard her, and pattered in and over to her on too-large legs, chirping happily, one wing half unfurled with a leather sling around it. She settled down beside the bed, draping her open wing over it like a blanket, and nuzzling softly.

"Astrid?"

The man's voice cracked, and he stepped slowly forward, putting most of his weight on one leg. He seemed almost scared to approach, scared that she would shatter into a thousand pieces, scared that he was just getting his hopes up again.

He stepped into a slip of light shooting through a gap in the roofing slats, and a name slid to the front of her mind at the sight of his green eyes and the familiar smell of leather and ash.

"Hiccup."

He made a sound if he were breaking, and before she knew how to move her limbs, he was wrapped around her, laughing and gasping and sobbing into her neck. Her body screamed in pain at the movement, but she didn't let a sound escape her lips, knowing that whatever she felt was simply physical, and what he was going through was something far deeper.

Stormfly huffed and slid her wing out from where he was crushing it, before resting the tip of her chin by the bed and watching carefully for signs of trouble.

Hiccup pulled away to look at Astrid, eyes searching hers, fingers ghosting over her cheeks. He traced what felt like a scar on one cheek, and bit back tears, before taking her bandaged hand and pressing his lips to it, like he did every night.

Another word floated into her hazed mind, bidden by the smell of clean bandages and ink, and she spoke it without realising.

"Husband."

His lips were soft when they crashed into her, the sharp action mitigated by the tenderness of the kiss. Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open when she realised she'd felt this before - sitting half slumped on the cool dirt of a cove, a thousand miles away, feeling his lips for the very first time, moving against hers with urgency and disbelief and gratitude.

And finally, she understood.

Back then, she had thought she was another whore to be taken and dispatched - no matter how many

time he explained what he had thought she was and what he thought she knew when he kissed her. He'd apologised for it, more than once, stumbling over his words as he wished their first kiss could have been less violent and presumptuous. She had laughed, kissing him soundly and telling him he couldn't change time, and should just be glad for what they had, however they had gotten it.

He had thought she had every answer. That she knew exactly who he was and what he stood for, and that she would stand beside him in those beliefs. That she was willing to abandon her home, her family, her entire life, for what he believed in. He had thought she was the most brave and beautiful and incredible woman to have ever existed, and that for some idiot reason, she had chosen him. And she would lay down her life for what she thought was right.

And now here she was - exactly that.

He was pulling away when she grabbed the back of his head and forced his lips back to hers.

He tried to move slowly, conscious of her wounds, but she wouldn't let him - instead, she ran her tongue over his and dug her fingers into his scalp until he let go and kissed her exactly how he wanted to. She sighed into his mouth as the back of his hand brushed her cheek, pushing her hair out of the way so he could kiss along her scar and up to her temple, leaving her to breathe heavily against his face and neck, feeling the delicious itch of his stubble against her sensitive skin.

His hand slid along her shoulder and down her arm, until his fingers gripped the bandages around her hand. She inhaled sharply as a spear of pain ran up her arm and through her body, and he pulled away, swearing.

"Shit, Astrid, you're - oh gods, I love you."

There was the breaking quality in his voice again, and she silenced it by pressing her lips to his, savouring the taste of the wind. When she broke away, she pulled him down to lie beside her, tugging the hem of his shirt pointedly. He pulled it over his head with a sheepish smile, but his eyes widened when he saw her unwinding the edge of her bandage.

She patted the side of the bed, and he sat down to remove his leg before swivelling to lie beside her. By then, the bandages were gone, and he could see what lay beneath.

Her flesh was black and swollen with bad blood, although nowhere near as badly as it had been when he'd broken down the door of the healers who had saved his life three months before and demanded they save hers too. There were thin scabs where the healers had nicked the skin to drain the wound, and four thick white scars along her palm, sticking out angrily against blackish-purple. Her hand itself was paralysed in a claw, although as he watched, she flexed her fingers slightly with a hiss of pain.

She used her good hand to take his and press it against her wounded flesh, the end of the bandage caught between their palms.

This time, he wrapped the bandage around their clasped hands, careful not to pull too tight or leave it too loose, and relishing the feel of her skin against his. She smiled sleepily as his tongue poked through his teeth in concentration, and when he was finished, he kissed her again, soft and sweet.

"I... I can't believe I have you."

She brought her free palm up to his cheek, tracing the sharp line of his jaw - the stubble itched her skin rather than stinging, and she decided she liked the feeling. He must have liked it too, judging by the way his eyes fell shut and he sighed through half-parted lips. She decided to take advantage of that, leaning in to press a kiss to a scar just below his bottom lip.

"I love you."

The words tickled her fringe, and stirred a memory deep in her chest. She spoke the words without thinking, angling them to brush against his lips.

"You better. Since I love you."

* * *

><p>She woke the next morning, finally certain of consciousness with his arms rested gently around

her.<p>

She could feel the bare skin of his chest pressed against her back, ink meeting ink, but he curled away from his shoulders, avoiding contact with her still bruised and sore torso. Their hands were still bound, his arm rested across her shoulder and hers bent up across to meet his. She shifted, turning in his arms and biting into her lip to hide the gasp of pain. She still wasn't used to moving.

Her hair dragged across his face as she rolled and he woke with a sneeze, scrunching his face up adorably, and she was unable to stop the smile which cracked across her face. She could still feel one of her teeth hanging loose in its place, from the single blow to her jaw during her torture, and was surprised it hadn't hurt when they were kissing like the world had run out of air. She wondered if it was her medication or just his presence that had stifled the sting, and kissed him gently to test.

Nope. Definitely her medication. She hurt like hell.

She pulled away, and with her mind finally clear, she could tell how badly beaten she was. There wasn't a single part of her that wasn't stiff and sore, and her belly was swollen with bruising and bad blood.

He smiled sleepily at her, as she drew away, their hands still caught together.

"You scared me."

His voice was barely above a whisper, and she felt the words before she heard them. It took three tries for her to even make a sound.

"How long was I out?"

He took their bound hands and rested them against his lips. "Three weeks."

She tried to laugh, and found the sound only scratched her throat, coming out as a breathy tremble. "Good. Now you know how I felt."

He smiled, the blunt end of his leg brushing against her knee. "No, I think this was worse. I didn't nearly die for you. And we weren't even..." He tried to find the right word for what exactly they_ were_.

"Married. You can say it."

"You weren't my wife."

Somehow it meant so much more. She settled into him, unfazed by the fact that his pants were the only clothing between them, and searched to fill the gaps in her mind.

"What happened? After Drago died?"

"How much can you remember?"

She was resting on the shoulder of her free hand, so she brought it up to play with the too-long ends of his hair while she ran her toes absentmindedly up and down his calf.

"You. I remember you, and Toothless, freeing the Bewilderbeast. And... oh gods, Stoick, is he okay?"

Her eyes widened in panic, and he shushed her, stroking her cheek with his free hand. "It's okay. He's fine. He's back on Berk, where he belongs. Skullcrusher's with him, keeping him safe."

She seizes slightly at the word _Berk_, but nods slightly.

"Astrid."

His voice is hesitant but determined, and she looks up at him, green eyes boring into hers.

"I killed him."

She froze, remembering her final request before she collapsed into his arms.

She wretched, her body heaving, sweat breaking across her brow as her mind was flooded with the

sour smell and rotting feeling crawling across her flesh. He grabbed her, steadied her, and his face broke when he gripped too tight and she hissed in pain. He moved up to hold her shoulders steady and press her face into his neck. She breathed into his skin, closing her eyes and letting the heat of his body and his gentle touch wash over her.

"I know what he did."

He wanted to bury the memory, but he couldn't do it alone. She had to rid herself of what that monster did too.

"How?"

"He told me."

He could still hear the words, sneered, then screamed once he and Snoutlout were given control of the prisoners. His skin still crawled at the memory of the words Posen used, harsh and crude and disgusting.

"He lied, at first. But we got the truth out of him eventually."

She shivered, knowing what that must mean.

"He... what he did to Allayne..."

Her heart seized and her fingers twitched against his at the thought of what had almost happened to her - and what had definitely been done to Allayne. There was a naked fury in Hiccup's voice, and she knew that if he hadn't killed the man already, he would do it again a thousand times.

"Where is she?"

"She's safe. She and Eret, they left a few days ago, with the boy. They're they're going to be okay."

She thought of Allayne, naked and soaked in blood, her wrists and fingers broken, her eyes pleading with Astrid to just let her die.

"But... what he did to you..."

He left the words hanging, letting her choose where they went.

"How did he die?"

"Blood eagle."

She shivered, but there was a black pleasure to be found in the motion.

"Tell me."

Her eyes were dark and dilated, and for a moment he was scared that his wife was truly vicious. Then he remembered the words spat through broken teeth, the festering remains of his leg that were found in one of the domes with what was left of Astrid's skirt, the sick smile on Posen's lips as he swore he had torn Astrid and Allayne apart himself.

"I used your axe. Sliced down his back." He wasn't sure what made him do it, but he moved his free hand from her shoulder and slid it down the curve of her spine. She shivered and shifted with his motions, moaning in both pain and pleasure as her bruised flesh screamed and every other part of her sighed. His hand stopped at the small of her back, his wrist fitting perfectly under the curve of her waist.

"I broke his ribs and folded them out like wings."

He left his free hand on her spine and used their bound ones to trace the rise of her ribs. Her breathing became sharp and heavy as he ghosted along her bruised and tender flesh, before settling on her relatively untouched sternum.

"Then I pulled his lungs out of his back, and left him out for the birds."

She grinned savagely at that, pressing their hands closer against the flesh between her breasts.

"Did he scream?"

Victims of the blood eagle were provided one small justice - if they suffered in silence, they could reach Valhalla.

"I made sure of that."

She shivered, and he leaned forward to press his lips lightly against her temple, whispering right into her ear.

"Valhalla is for you, not the likes of him."

He kissed the shell of her ear and smiled as she melted against him with a gasp, digging her fingers into his shoulder and moving their bound hands up to skate over the tip of her breast, the rough fabric rubbing roughly against the sensitive skin in almost the same way his stubble did.

He groaned and bit down on her ear when she drew a knee up to grind against the growing hardness in his pants, and that only made her press harder and pull his spare hand out from under her waist and press it down toward the curls between her legs. He complied, too eagerly, sliding his fingers teasingly against her already damp slit, and freezing when her moans of pleasure turned sharp and pained.

He pulled away, dragging his hand from her and pushing the parts of her that had reached for him as far away as possible while still in a small bed and bound to her hand. She scowled as he curled away, pupils shrinking back to a normal size, trying to steady his heartbeat.

"Odin's ghost Astrid - I can't--"

She was still scowling when she pulled him back to her with their bound hands, hissing with pain and trying to smile.

"I'm fine, just--"

"You only just woke up! You can't even walk yet!"

She raised an eyebrow. "I don't need to."

He let out a shaky sigh, trying to rid his mind of exactly how long it had been and - oh gods, the last time had been in the cave when she'd first bound them together, and now--

He brought his free hand up to her shoulder, tracing the tip of a wing just visible over the rise of her skin.

"I love you Astrid. I can't see you hurt."

She twisted to press her lips against his wrist, her hair tickling her own nose.

"Then just don't hurt me."

She took his hand and slid it against her jaw, rubbing his thumb over her lips. After a moment, she left his hand where she put it, trusting him to keep up the motion, and reached out for his cheek. Her blood rushed in a different way at his intense gaze, tightening in her chest.

"It's over."

He nodded against the pillow, and let her trace the bags under his eyes. She hadn't realised until then how tired he looked.

"How does it feel?"

He shifted a little closer, so she could feel his breath against her lips as well as his fingers.

"Exhausting," he finally breathed, letting his eyes fall shut under her ministrations. She moved to run the pad of her thumb over his eyelid, and he felt as if he were the one to have finally woken from a pain induced coma, not her. He should be doing this for her, making sure she was healed and rested instead of trying to jump her and burdening her with his own troubles.

But here she was, caring for him when she was at her worst, still loving him in spite of everything. His heart swelled and he felt every muscle in his body sigh and relax after weeks of

tension. A sigh slipped through his lips and into her mouth, barely realising she'd kissed him before she had pulled away again. He kept stroking her lips, making sure she was still there as he stared at the back of his eyelids, trying to reconcile himself with the fact that it was finally over.

"When was the last time you slept?"

He laughed lightly. "Ten minutes ago."

Her hand pinched his cheek, and he could tell she was rolling her eyes. "Before then."

"I can't remember. I've been flying back here every night from Berk and leaving at dawn."

Her thumb stiffened against the bridge of his nose, again, at the name of her birthplace. She leaned in to kiss him again, keeping as close this time, the bound hands taking up the only space between them.

"So what's our next move?"

He opened his eyes, remembering the last time she'd used those words, the first time she'd thrown him over her shoulder, refusing to back down. She was staring at him with the same question in her eyes - testing, carefully, to see if his next step included her.

"That's up to you."

She sighed and looked down, as if searching for a tangible answer somewhere near their knees.

"I don't want to go back to Berk. Not now."

It was the only certain thing she knew, the only thing that struck deep in her heart when she thought of the next week, month, year.

"Good," he replied, lifting their bound hands to rest lightly on her waist and drawing her in even closer. "Because I've been banished."

She started, frowning in confusion.

"What?"

He nodded emphatically. "Turns out declaring war when you have no authority is kinda treason. You were right though - Snoutlout's not as bad as he seems."

She raised an eyebrow, hardly able to believe what she was hearing.

"No really, he's a very good arguer. In fact, he managed to convince the Council that, since I attacked because you were in danger, you were as much responsible for it as me."

She was going to hit him in the shoulder and ask how in Hel this was a good idea when he dipped his head to kiss her neck.

"So now, you've been banished too."

She sighed and tried to stay angry and confused as he sucked gently at her skin, distracting her wholeheartedly.

"But... the dragons—"

"Are taken care of. The village owed me a blood debt, so..."

Whatever he was going to say was lost in her pulling at his hair and dragging him up to look her in the eye.

"It's not just the dragons. What about the village? The Council? The other girls they'll throw to warlords since it seemed to work this time? And what about your father? And the —"

He silenced her with a kiss, and she forgot about all the other oppressed people she was going to list.

"Two years."

"What?"

"It's not permanent. We've been banished for two years. After which, I'm expected to return, and take my place as heir. Or, you know, shared heir - Snoutlout really isn't as bad as I thought, and he's agreed to step aside once I'm ready, and I think he's really cut up about Ruffnut right now and--"

"So what's our next move?"

He smiled and kissed her, because he could.

"I don't know. I mean, we're staying here for now - Rhea won't let you out of here alive, and Stormfly's still recovering, and I haven't _not_ had revenge to take for so long, I'm not sure what I'm going to do with myself."

"Take up metal work?"

He laughed, then remembered something. "Oh, wait," he said, sitting up in bed and whistling. The door of the shed creaked open after a moment, a wide black head sticking in through the gap - Toothless. He warbled happily at the sight of his rider and the man's mate, finally together again, and smiled gummily at the both of them. Astrid smiled back, and he bounded into the already crowded shed, curling around the side of the bed that Stormfly wasn't already occupying.

"Okay bud, looks like it's happy family time."

Hiccup reached over the edge of the bed, as far as their bound hands would let him, and untied the cloth package with one hand, pulling it up onto the bed. As he turned to face her and smile sheepishly, offering the gift, she noticed a new tattoo on the left of his chest, just above his heart. She reached her free hand up to brush her fingertips over it, and he shivered.

"That better not be some whore's name."

He started, and realised he never had time to finish teaching her to read. The tattoo on her back must have been done by a literate healer, and he cringed at the realisation of how wrong her tattoos could have gone. Reading. That was something they could work on over the next two year.

His heart thudded at the idea that they had two years to just spend together, and it almost stopped when he realised that they really had the rest of their lives.

He took her hand and traced each letter, spelling out the name. By the time he got to T, her eyes had fluttered shut. He had to kiss her awake when he reached D, and whisper her name into her lips to get an approving nod.

"Open it," he said eventually, nudging the package with his knee, and she smiled and struggled onto her elbows. Realising she wasn't going to change her mind, he helped her into a sitting position, her back pressed against the headboard and the sheet slipping down to pool around her waist. She pulled the package closer and undid the leather cord around it, before flicking it at him and grinning.

"Since when do you get me presents?"

He shrugged. "I'm returning it, really."

Her breath stopped short when she finally pulled away the cloth to reveal her axe, finally completed. She had almost forgotten about the chalk patterns that had been drawn on the steel when he'd first given it to her, not knowing if he'd ever live to see her swing it, but here they were, finally wrought into the axe-head in exquisite, intricate detail. She traced the twisting patterns with their joined hands, following them around the curve of the blade and recognising the same string of runes that now adorned his chest and the skin between her shoulder blade. It was exactly as functional and vicious as it had always been, but now so much more beautiful.

"Hiccup."

She breathed the word with reverence, then looked up at him with hungry eyes.

"Don't give me gifts I can't repay."

He scoffed, his eyebrows disappearing into his hairline. "Says the woman who saved my life and

killed Drago Bludvist."

She shrugged, teasing, knowing the movement would draw his eyes to the bouncing swell of her breasts.

"No, really - what do you want?"

She was torturing him, and he didn't give a fuck. Finally, for once in his life, he didn't have to worry about time or urgency, about the constant threat of death and separation hanging over them. He had time for her to tease.

"Well, if you really want to know," he said, reaching out to lay a palm across her left breast, careful to avoid the bruises running up her ribs. "I could use a heart."

She raised a lazy eyebrow and stretched her arms over her head, enjoying the freedom that sitting gave her. Her muscles twinged, but it was deep and pleasant instead of painful.

"A heart?"

"Yep," he said, skimming his hand along her flesh and somehow still looking so innocent, even as he circled her nipple. "I gave mine away, so I could use a spare."

She tilted her head to the side and gave him a disbelieving look.

"You're ridiculous."

"I'm in love."

"Same thing."

She leaned in to kiss him, trapping his hand against her breast and holding their bound grip against her stomach, pressing lightly into the bruised flesh. It hurt, but she shut it out, not caring for anything but his lips sliding against hers.

"So, is that a yes on the heart thing?" Hiccup finally managed to ask when she broke away for air. She laughed and kissed his nose.

"You already have mine."

He sighed and leaned into her. "Even without my insatiable lust for revenge?"

She giggled and slid a hand down his chest, following the trail of barely-there hair from his sternum to just above the waistline of his pants.

"You'll just have to find some else to channel all the insatiable lust into," she said dismissively, scooting down to lie back against the bed before hesitating, the sting returning to ruin her fun.

"We'll just have to... this won't be easy. You might have to..."

He silenced her with a kiss and slid carefully down beside her, then kissed their bound hands.

"I don't care. However long it takes. I love you Astrid."

There was so much simple honesty in his words that her heart lurched.

"I love you too."

"Good! Because you're stuck with me for the next, I don't know, seventy years? I'm thinking seventy years, and about fifty great-grandchildren, and then you'll be stuck with me in the next life too, because I'm not going anywhere without you. And you'll have to put up with my yammering, and my world's-shortest-attention-span, and my lazy dragon, and my fake leg-"

She shut him up with a bruising kiss, driving every thought from his mind but her.

As his hand stroked along the scar on her cheek before twisting into her short gold hair and holding her tight to him, she decided that if she got to keep him for the rest of eternity, putting up with his stupid faults for seventy years was a sacrifice she was willing to make.

29. Epilogue

It was early spring, two years after the army of Drago Bludvist had been disbanded and the dragons had become allies instead of enemies, that the Night Fury and Deadly Nadder were spotted out at sea.

They weren't an unfamiliar sight. In fact, it was common for the two to hover just in sight of the village, waiting for other dragon riders to spot them and fly out to meet them on seastacks and smaller islands, just outside Hooligan territory. Once they arrived, the Berk riders would be schooled or trained in more advanced manoeuvres and flight techniques, sometimes for a few hours, sometimes a few days. The two more experienced riders would guide them through the motions, advise them on solving dragon issues in the village, and offer letters and bounty that they had seized in their ongoing mission to destroy the last strongholds of Drago's army.

The two riders were utterly, maddeningly in love - that much was obvious. They hadn't been seen for almost a year after their banishment, but to look at them it seemed as if every time they saw one another it was for the first time. They kept their hands off each other for the most part in mixed, Berkian company, but the times they offered more than one day's training, they would disappear at night to spare their friends and comrades the sound of their heated moans and sighs.

For nine months, they'd been a regular fixture in Berk life, but for the past four, they had been missing, off on some final mission to destroy a slaver's ring operating out to the west, which captured children and hatchlings alike to sell into servitude.

Hiccup had promised to return to Berk, for good, once it was over, and Stoick had not taken the words lightly. Skullcrusher hadn't either, snorting in both approval and threat at Toothless, before stamping his feet and pointing his snout back to Berk and the smoked trout he knew awaited him for dinner.

Hiccup had smiled at the dragon's almost spoilt behaviour, and laced his hands with Astrid's without even thinking as he farewelled his father. Stoick had raised an eyebrow, and although he tried to scrub the memory from his mind, Hiccup could still see the way his father had mouthed the word heirs when Astrid's gaze was elsewhere.

It had been a difficult, hard four months. And now, there they were, on the horizon, only two days late.

The first delay had been necessary - Toothless' tail fin had been ripped in a daring dive, and it needed repair before they could fly again. The second delay had been slightly less direct, but just as necessary.

"No."

"Yes."

"No!"

"Please."

She could feel his fingers stroking the back of her neck, brushing the ends of her hair as he traced the ink of her tattoos. His other hand, however, was sneaking up to the roots of her hair, so she grabbed it and bit lightly into the joint of his thumb.

"No."

He leaned in to press his chin into the crook of her neck and breathe hotly against her skin. She was naked, bracketed between his equally bare legs and leaning back into his chest.

"_Please_ Astrid."

"For the last time Hiccup, it's too short to braid!"

They had landed in the cove after she had paused in the air, Berk just visible on the horizon, and declared that he needed to braid her hair. Once they were on firm ground, however, she changed her tune, pulling off her leggings before he had even wrenched his leg from Toothless' rig. He hadn't complained (although dragons had, huffing and curing together in a far distant corner of the cove, Toothless with his ear flaps closed close around his head.)

They had been comfortably resting against the furs, content and satisfied, before he started teasingly twisting her hair.

He kissed her neck beseechingly. "But mine's shorter, and you still braid it."

She smirked and stretched an arm lazily back to tug at the small knots on the back of his head.

"Plait. I _plait_ it. How many times am I going to have to explain this?"

"At least a few thousand times more."

She sighed against him, rolling her eyes as he kissed along her collarbone and paused to lift her scarred hand to his lips, before sliding his own hand teasingly down her ribs. He smiled against her skin at the easy intimacy, still disbelieving after more than two years.

She squeaked when his arms closed around her waist and pulled her back into him, sending the both of them sprawling back on the furs in a heap. She shrieked with laughter as he mercilessly ticked her sides, and her laughs turned throaty when she realised how much of an effect her squirming had had on him.

She rolled him onto his back, leaning over close to drop a searing kiss to his lips.

"Now," she demanded, reaching down to stroke him and finding him already hot and hard. She grinned wickedly and tugged at him, watching as the thin rim of green in his eyes surrendered itself to black. She herself needed no encouragement - she was still damp from before, when she'd planted her feet against the furs and twisted her fingers in his hair as he broke her to pieces using only his tongue.

The minute braiding came up again, she was practically weeping.

It had become a quiet, covert code between them, whenever they were in mixed company. It had started out by accident, in the home of the Meathead chief, when she'd sat by and watched Hiccup firmly argue down the chief under his own roof, and through use of stern words alone had swayed the tribe to make peace with dragons. She had been so aroused by his commanding presence that she almost pressed his hands straight to her centre and bend over a table for him in front of the whole assembly. Instead, she had somehow found the fortitude to firmly clasp his arm and remind him, in a voice far huskier than usual, that she needed him to _braid her hair_. He hadn't understood, of course, and had genuinely started weaving her hair through his hand when she finally had them behind a locked door. She had rolled her eyes and shoved him back against the wall, taking his pants with her as she dropped to her knees, and she would never forget his cracked, disbelieving voice asking politely if she still wanted him to braid her hair from there.

And now, the mere idea of braids sent a bolt of warmth through her belly. She had added two to the base of his skull, retying them every time he pulled them out, and glancing at them whenever he suggested that maybe, it was time he braided her hair for once.

He smiled at her as she slid down his body, taking a moment to let him nip at the tip of her breast and enjoy the new sensitivity of the flesh as she moaned and ground against him. His hands found her hips, and she slid him into her with practised ease, rocking forwards and letting her jaw fall open. Her hand traced his tattoos as she rode him, just as she had that first uncertain time in this very cave, when she hadn't known him or even truly known herself, and had been so surprised at the boiling intensity of just the feel of him. Now, two and a half years later, he rolled and ground against her with the sensual skill acquired through much practise, with a look in his eyes that made her feel both completely loved and utterly claimed.

He had started with both hands steadying her hips, but sure enough, she felt one palm slide to the curve of her stomach, as had become its habit over the past few months.

"It's not - oh gods - it's not going anywhere."

He grinned up at her and slid the hand down to where they were joined, circling the knot of nerves just above her, his fingers grazing against his own thrusting length. She cried out and bore into him, swearing beneath her breath.

"If I'd known you'd be so needy," he panted, "I would have gotten you like this a long time ago."

She scowled and leaned down to bite into his shoulder - he hissed in pain and arousal.

"I would have castrated you with my teeth."

He shivered, and she scoffed. "What? You can't deny that's a... _powerful _image."

She nibbled along the shell of his ear. "It can still be arranged."

He pressed hard against her, still thrusting and rolling, and she practically growled into him. He decided now was as good a time as any to get his revenge.

"Too late."

He drove into her and held her down by the hip, pressing against her nub in a sharp circle and turning his head to capture her lips with his. She shuddered, into the kiss and around him, and as ever, he let go with her.

They washed in the lake once she pulled herself off him, and he barely took his hands from her belly the whole time.

"I'm not _that_ fat," she finally said, flicking a handful of droplets at him. "It's only been four months."

He grinned like an idiot and kissed the top of her damp head, his hands coming around to caress her stomach again. "Gods, I don't know how I'll bare seeing you soon."

She scowled. "I'll try not to disgust you for the next five months."

He rolled his eyes and dropped down to her eye level, then lower, resting his head against the slight swell of her belly.

"I mean, I don't know how I'll be able to see you across the village or the Great Hall and not have you then and there."

She scoffed and tried to hide her insecurity behind scorn. She hadn't believed him when he had first said she was _glowing_ - she had straight up laughed in his face - but as the months went by and he kept saying it, she started to think he was telling the truth. He couldn't keep his hands off her but that could just be sheer masculine pride at the sight and knowledge of her carrying _his _child - either way, it was good, since whatever usually sent her blood spiking around the full moon had come to stay with the babe.

She sighed and just relaxed into him, savouring the moment. It could be a long while before they next had the time or privacy to fully take advantage of her _glow_ and constant need.

Berk.

It didn't scare her like it once had - she had seen enough of its citizens on dragonback in the past year, had enough of them ask her advice and thank her for her part in saving their village, to trust that at least part of the village had changed. The Council had been disbanded, those who had suggested and facilitated her sacrifice had been disgraced, and Stoick had finally come out of his stupor and set the village to rights.

But now they were headed back to the island itself, to those who hadn't taken to the dragon way, and their whispers and stares.

Oh, how they'd love the missing heir returning with his virgin sacrifice and unborn bastard.

They wouldn't care that she and Hiccup were married, twice - once with bound hands and soft cries, and once with ceremony and smoke in front of gods they'd never prayed to, with a piece of parchment to certify that they were one. Rhea had given them two small gold bands, a wedding tradition from their own home, and Astrid had liked the cool metal against her finger almost as much as she liked the sight of its mate on Hiccup's finger. It had been that night, she was certain, that the child had been conceived between expensive wine and the thrill of being married _again._ It had been their anniversary too, he'd announced, since it was two years since they'd both come clean and tumbled into one another and made a mess of Rhea's kitchen and shed. She had carried him to bed for old times sake, stripping him with practised ease and leaving him with nothing but the ring she'd placed on his finger. With the sheer number of times they'd consummated their second marriage, it was practically a statistical fact that the child must have been created that night.

She wasn't sure if he was more terrified than her at the prospect of parenthood. He was certainly more excited - since he didn't have to deal with swollen breasts and sore ankles and a squashed

bladder - but his joy was definitely coupled with fear. It was good he was scared, Allayne had told her when she confided in the older woman. If he wasn't, it meant he didn't care.

If there was one thing Hiccup certainly did, it was care.

They dried out on the rocks she had once slept on to escape him, his head rested against her belly while her fingers carded gently through his hair, untangling and retying his braids again and again. In the fading sunlight, he shone a light gold, freckles standing out like constellations against his skin, and she decided that if her glow looked anything like that, it was no wonder he was as needy as her. She brushed her fingers against the back of his neck and he hummed contentedly, sending vibrations through her skin to her heart.

"We'll have to sneak back here for wash day," he muttered, running a hand absentmindedly along her thigh.

"And what will we do once _he's_ born?"

He twisted to rest his chin against her navel and stare up at her through the valley between her breasts. "Once _she's_ born, well, I guess a lot of things will change."

She smiled sleepily down at him. "Then we'll have to keep the things we can. Every wash day, I think."

He shuffled up to embrace her and kiss the straight scar along the top of her shoulders. When his hands started twisting in her hair again, she didn't stop him. The plait he eventually guided her hands to feel was rough and bulky, going from her part down to the tips of her hair, hanging down to tuck behind her ear and be covered by other looser locks.

She kissed him, and wondered why she was always so against this.

"It's almost sunset."

She sighed heavily. "I know."

"Do you... are you ready?"

She thought for a moment, then closed her hand around his. She could feel the cool metal of his wedding band, pressed against hers.

"Only if you are."

The dragons were sighted by sunset, and were welcomed with cheers and cries that the future chief and his wife had finally come home.

fin

* * *

><p>AN: And that's it folks! I just wanted to say an enormous thank you to everyone who has read and favourited and reviewed this story - you've really inspired me as a writer to keep going. I'm usually someone who writes half an idea and can't find the motivation to finish anything, and yet here I am, about a hundred thousand words later, and I have you guys to thank for that.

**I'll be taking a bit of a break to work on some of my original stuff, but I'll probably be posting the odd drabble and taking requests on tumblr (thaipothetical-situations), so come check that out if that's what you're into. While we're talking tumblr, I also want to give a shout out to Cat at hiilikedragons, who came up with the original idea for a sacrifice AU (and without whom literally none of this would exist) and yuccaoxl, who has done some extraordinary fan art based on this fic. **

Also, obviously, How To Train Your Dragon is property of Dreamworks - please don't sue me.

Seriously though - thank you all so much for reading, and I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did writing it.

**Thai out!**

End file.